

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS QUEEN

by

Debbi R.

This short memoir is dedicated to my daughter and includes sincere gratitude to all the people who believed in me over the years.

*An Extra Special Thank You to
Megan Zavala for her Developmental, Line, and Copy Editing skills, as well as putting up with
my neuroticism over this piece.*

This short memoir discusses trauma. I can't give enough trigger warnings to prepare you.

If you are not in a good place mentally/emotionally to read about **anything** that could trigger you, please do not read it.

Chapter 1

I sat at my computer, staring at the Google Meets link. The face of Jon, the CEO, appeared on the screen. He was geeky-looking, just as I'd imagined, but with a serious expression that softened when he saw me. Not what I expected from a CEO of a multimillion-dollar dating empire.

"Hi, Debbi."

"Hi, Jon."

He was cordial, disarmingly so. No anger, no defensiveness, no corporate double-speak. Just a guy who wanted to have a conversation.

"I want you to know," he said a little later, "that the things people say about me don't bother me."

The loser comment – he was talking about the loser comment. I'd called him that in my anger, in my hurt. And here he was, telling me it didn't matter.

I didn't know what to say to that. Part of me wanted to apologize. Part of me still meant it.

"I'd like you to come back to blogging," he continued. "Back to the community."

There it was: the ask. The reason for this call.

"No."

The word came out before I could second-guess myself. His eyebrows raised slightly, but he didn't interrupt. Though the room I was in was cool, our air conditioner was no match for the Florida heat.

"I prefer the freedom of blogging offsite," I explained. "I'm not getting as much attention, sure, but it's the connections that matter to me, not the follower count."

It was true. My independent blog didn't have the reach that AdultFriendFinder did. But I could write what I wanted, how I wanted, without worrying about reviewers denying my posts.

Without someone deciding my voice was too loud, too critical, too much.

"The site disrupted three months of relationships," I continued, feeling the anger rise again.

"Relationships I'd built over years. When you exiled the four of us, we were devastated. We were angry. Do you understand that?"

"I do," he said simply.

We talked more. About my evolution on the site, how I'd gone from pornographer to real person, from performing to being authentic. About the heart attack that nearly killed me, the

therapy that was helping me heal, the garden that grounded me.

The conversation meandered through what I felt were the issues on the site. I found myself relaxing slightly, though I kept my guard up – this was still the CEO who'd approved my ban, and this was still the company that had hurt me.

"I'd like to offer you a job," he said finally.

A job. Not just "come back to blogging." *A job*. Working for them. For him.

The irony wasn't lost on me. Three months ago, they'd silenced me. Now they wanted to *pay* me.

My cats were running around in the background, wreaking chaos, I'd long ago learned to tune them out when I needed to focus. "I'll think about it," I said.

And I meant it. I didn't say yes, but I didn't say no either. The door was open, just slightly.

When the call ended, I sat there for a long time, staring at the black screen. My reflection stared back at me – purple hair, tired eyes, a woman who'd almost died and decided to stop pretending.

What had just happened?

I thought about the three months in exile. The emails from friends on the inside, worried about me, angry on my behalf. The devastation of being cut off from people I'd grown to love. The

slow realization that maybe I was better off without the site.

But I also thought about what I'd lost. The community I'd helped build. The Friday Farm Day posts that made people smile. The Court of AFF Opinion silliness. The teasing wars with my UK professor friend. The connections that had meant everything.

Jon had said he'd follow up. Ali would call about specifics.

I had time to decide, to figure out if going back was surrender or strategy, and to ask myself if I could work for people who'd hurt me, or if this was a chance to change things from the inside.

I turned around and looked at my partner Nick, who had been lying on the couch the entire meeting. The look of utter shock on his face matched mine.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“I don't know yet.”

I knew I'd take Ali's call when it came, and I knew I'd listen to what they had to offer. Because maybe, just maybe, there was something here worth exploring.

Or maybe I was just curious to see how far they'd go to get me back.

It was also possible I was being manipulated. I couldn't tell for sure. Whatever the reason, the

conversation wasn't over.

It was just beginning.

If you didn't guess it already from the title, I have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, my current therapist calls me the Post-Traumatic Stress Queen.

My childhood was rife with one traumatic event after the next. Speed round: I was molested by my paternal step-grandfather from ages five to 12. My mother committed suicide when I was 13, and my father remarried less than a year later. My older brother molested me when I was between the ages of 14 and 16. I married at 18. My father died when I was 21, and my brother stole the insurance money.

Get the picture?

My mother's suicide was the earthquake that shattered our family, and my father's remarriage so soon afterward was the betrayal that made sure we'd never piece it back together. My sister never recovered. My brother never recovered. None of us were the same.

Never having really grown up, throughout my life I failed to take responsibility for anything, and I was generally a quite miserable person. One who used sex to help me feel better. It was a temporary fix, of course – it never took. Sex doesn't do anything but help you connect with other people in one minuscule way. It could never repair the gaping wound my childhood

caused in my soul.

I had no idea that this website – this place I'd stumbled into looking for connection, for escape, for anything to fill the hole – would eventually become the place where I'd find my voice, lose everything, and then negotiate my worth with the CEO who'd tried to silence me. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Chapter 2

Despite all the horrible things my step-grandfather did to me when I was young, I continue to see my childhood up until my mother's suicide as magical – my extended family calls it "unconventional." I grew up in the seventies with permissive parents who spoiled me and my siblings.

Here's a list of things I told a friend of mine recently. His shock was all I needed to know.

- We had no discipline.
- I was never spanked as a child.
- We had no bedtimes.
- When adults came over, we were encouraged to hang out with them.
- I learned to play poker from my parents by the time I was 10.
- We took snowmobiling trips every winter.
- My mother drove us cross country, in a station wagon, from Michigan to Disneyland,

without seat belts. And fed us junk food the entire way. Patience of a saint, I tell you.

Frankly, things became even more permissive *after* my mother died. My father was rarely home, though he would buy us anything we asked for when he was around. He would come home, give us money for food and stuff, then leave again. It's still unclear to me, to this day, where he was going.

That's when the bullshit with my brother started. I remember a lot, but I'm not telling anyone any of it. That's between me and my therapist.

My father remarried. I don't want to badmouth the woman. I was a bratty, spoiled teenager who lacked discipline, and she was a firm believer in it. I rebelled by not listening to her and maligning her to everyone I knew. I even ran away from home once, though of course I came back. I was 16 and lived far away from everyone I knew and loved aside from my sister. By this point, I hated my brother and father, loathed my stepmother, and was apathetic towards her three children. And then we moved away from the only town I ever remembered living in, away from all my friends and family.

I never had what anyone would call a stable "home" growing up. We moved a lot. As a family, we rarely stayed in a home more than five years. But most of those years were in New Baltimore, Michigan, where I spent the majority of my childhood.

I was sent to a Lutheran high school after spending years attending a Catholic church and public school, which only made me more rebellious – you see, my stepmother and her children were Lutheran. I would literally write papers about Catholic doctrine for my Lutheran

classes. Seriously.

My untreated ADHD-addled brain would go on these hyper-focused trips to the library, where I would spend hours researching Catholic doctrine so I could "gotcha" the Lutheran teachers. In Bible class I refused to use anything but the Catholic Bible. Boy, wasn't I a fun little bunch of neuroses? I can only imagine what the teachers were thinking.

I even taught catechism. Oh yes, folks, in an effort to rebel even further against my stepmother, when I was 17, I decided to teach catechism to children. Dear lord, it cracks me up just thinking about how "rebellious" I thought I was by teaching catechism. *Come on, Deb, really?*

I carried a lot of guilt in those days, guilt over things that were beyond my control. I would do things to myself to relieve the emotional pain of that remorse. I don't want to get into it too deeply, but let's say I self-harmed.

It wasn't until my senior year in high school that I switched to a public school and my more rebellious side calmed down. I was working full time for a nursing home as a nurse's aide during that year, saving up to go to the college where I was accepted: Saginaw Valley State.

It was then my father found out about what my brother had been doing. My cowardly ass didn't even tell him that he was doing it to me. Oh no, my friends, my sister told him he was doing it to *her*. I didn't know that.

On my 18th birthday, he came down to my room in the basement of our six-bedroom, white

colonial house with the pond in the backyard and told me what my sister said my brother was doing. He asked if my brother had done it to me. I said no, even though he did. I told him what my step-grandfather did and he walked out of the room. Nothing else was said.

Not being listened to hurt. I felt betrayed, yet again, by my father.

My brother no longer lived at home. I do remember having to see a social worker at some agency, but I denied anything happened there, too. Nothing happened to my brother, even though they had what my sister told them.

Eight weeks later, in the summer of 1986, I met the man who was to become my first husband, right after I graduated high school. His best friend was marrying mine, and I was enchanted by this man. His quiet, accepting demeanor drew me in to him.

Hindsight being 20/20, I can easily see I'm drawn to quiet, stoic men whose emotional distance reminds me of my father's. And he was just that: emotionally distant but protective, with caring eyes. I felt safe with him for some reason, safe in a way I didn't usually feel in those days. Maybe it was because he was in the military, I don't know.

At the wedding, I was paired with him. There was this whole thing that went down where my best friend originally paired me with my ex-boyfriend who cheated on me, then realized it was a bad idea – that ex-boyfriend got drunk at the wedding. Soon-to-be first husband and I had to drive him home.

Whenever he and his best friend could get time away from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where

they were stationed, we would all spend time together. Not romantically, but as friends. I would write him letters, too.

I went off to college in late August 1986 with him back in Fort Campbell. This is when our conversations turned romantic. Back in those days, you could charge phone calls to your home number. I can't imagine the bills I racked up on my father's phone bill calling him when I was away at college. It had to have been astronomical. We also wrote letters back and forth.

I wasn't doing well at college. The classes I was interested in were simple for me, like in high school; the ones that bored me just made me struggle even more. Lectures are boring, period. Put me in a room full of people making noise and ask me to pay attention to what the professor is saying? Yeah, right!

Give me an interesting book, tell me to read it and write a detailed essay on what I think the meaning is? Now, we're talking.

Math? Give me the book, let me figure it out on my own – I will. Except Geometry. Let's just say I have poor spatial perception and reasoning. ADHD hit me hard – I can see that now with a proper diagnosis and understanding.

By October, I was planning my escape from college into the arms of the man I planned to marry. Oh yes, in my mind it had gotten deep on the phone and in those letters. When I called my father to tell him I was going to Fort Campbell, Kentucky/Clarksville, Tennessee (they border each other) to be with my first husband, he didn't say a thing. I heard a gasp, but he didn't say anything that I remember.

I bought myself a plane ticket and flew into Nashville, Tennessee, not knowing what my future was going to bring. I couldn't continue at college and I didn't want to go to Indiana, where my father had moved with my sister, stepmother, and her children when I left for college.

So I moved in with him. Eventually we drove up to Indiana and spent time with my father, sister, stepmother, and her kids. We told him we planned to marry, and my father and stepmother had all kinds of plans.

Do you want to know what our plans were? To elope. That's exactly what happened, too.

In December of 1986, standing in the living room of our home, I married him, both of us wearing jeans with only our closest friends in attendance.

It took a while for me to tell my father, but I did so eventually. He still wanted to have a wedding at his house. We acquiesced and that wedding took place in March of 1987, when my mother's family, stepmother's family, and father's family, along with a few friends and my husband's brother, gathered at my father's home for a big ole party. One where people ended up in the pool at the end.

Later that year, we traveled to New Jersey and I met his parents. They were so different from my family that I struggled to relate to them. They were quiet and reserved – given his demeanor I'm not sure why I thought they'd be different.

I can't remember exactly when, but eventually my father moved out of the home he shared with my stepmother in Indiana, and took my sister with him. They moved back to Michigan. I

can't tell you what happened, I just don't know.

I would take trips back to Michigan during that time, as I missed my sister and my husband couldn't get the time off of work. Before the days of cell phones and internet, my goofy ass would drive all the way to Utica, Michigan from Clarksville, Tennessee and back, by myself, at 19 – that's over 500 miles one way.

Don't get me wrong, I'd visit other family too. But I was driving all that way to see my sister.

There came a time during Easter break from school when my sister came to visit me. One of my husband's friends was living with us during this time, and he and my sister became very friendly – she ended up pregnant on that trip. Bloody hell, am I right? I can't help but laugh, today.

She finished high school, but soon she was living with us, and boy did we fight – like cats and dogs. I had grown so much more independent and was used to having things the way I wanted, and here she came, changing them around. It was a battle that was fought weekly, but we hung in there.

There were also a lot of good times for us, where we'd talk and fuss over the baby.

When her son was born, he stole my heart. That boy – I had cuteness aggression like you wouldn't believe – I'd cover my teeth with my lips and just munch on him. His little hands, feet, chubby little cheeks and toes. Oh, just so freaking cute.

In 1989, my husband received orders that he was going to be stationed in Alaska. He had to report there before me, and he did. Before it came time for me to leave for Alaska, I said goodbye to my sister, her husband, and her baby, and drove to Michigan, on my own, to say goodbye to my father and some of my friends and family.

Then I was there, just a month after my 21st birthday, landing in Alaska. Another home, another new group of friends to make, and more trauma stuffing than any of you can possibly imagine. I don't know how to explain how I made it through those years without saying that there are signs that I wasn't doing well.

There were moments where I'd lock myself away in my room. Times when I was inconsolable. Days where I'd just stare at the wall, disassociating. I felt as though I could leave my body and not feel the things I was feeling.

December 8, 1989, my husband was in the field practicing "Army." They call it "going out in the field," and it's where they practice for war – I don't know how else to describe it. I received a phone call from my brother, asking where my husband was.

I told him, and that's when he told me my father died.

I screamed loud enough that the neighbor two doors down came running.

He had a heart attack. He wasn't coming back. That was that.

I was crushed, crumpled on the floor, crying for hours.

In the Army, as a spouse, you get to know the other spouses, and the first sergeant's spouse in your spouse's platoon, well. They have meetings and phone chains to facilitate this, and the Army wives from my husband's platoon got to work getting my him out of the field while they held me.

Once he returned, we made the plans to go to Michigan for my father's funeral. It was a mess. My father, we thought, had no life insurance. It also turned out that my father never paid for my mother's grave or for a headstone. Oh yes, people, imagine being 19, 21, and 23 and learning all this, right after your father died.

We were there for a month dealing with all the bologna. It was all such a whirlwind, the entire thing. What I do remember was there was a lot of fighting. My sister and I and our husbands, siding against my brother and his wife.

My father had no will and he had no money. That man was living on mostly credit.

We had the funeral and he was cremated. When the ground thawed, in spring of 1990, we buried his ashes with our mother under a joint headstone.

We did what we could, emptied his apartment, turned in his auto lease, and closed out what we knew to do before I went back to Alaska with my husband and my sister returned to Clarksville with hers.

What we didn't know was my sister was about to come live with us, pregnant. Her husband and she weren't getting along, and so up to Alaska she came with her son and we helped

raise him. My sister and I continued to fight, but I was there in the delivery room with her when she gave birth to her daughter in October of 1990 via c-section.

Whew, that was a whole thing – my sister wanted me to tell her the gender of the baby, but she was having a c-section and I didn't want to look at that. *Don't worry*, I told her, but I wasn't feeling very well when I did it. We're lucky I stayed on my feet is all I'm saying.

I distinctly remember taking my nephew out trick or treating in Alaska that year. I want you all to imagine how cold it is in Alaska in October, and it was probably colder and with more snow. That boy was wrapped up so well, he couldn't walk right. He looked like a little gingerbread man, freaking adorable.

After my sister returned to her husband, I had baby fever bad. I went in for fertility testing but was diagnosed with PCOS (polycystic ovarian syndrome) and we learned I'd have to take hormones to get pregnant. Hooo, boy howdy – fertility hormones, untreated ADHD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are FUUUUUUN.

Somewhere during this time we learned of an insurance policy my father took out back when he and my mother got married. While I can't give all the details, I do know the insurance agent told me that the policy's beneficiary was my mother and/or the child/ren from that marriage. My brother took that policy and cashed it, claiming to be the only sibling. Neither my sister nor I did anything about it – we just let him have it.

I can't presume to understand what my sister was thinking. Shoot, I don't even know how to correctly describe my state of mind, other than to say I was bonkers. I would be fine one

minute, flying off the handle the next. I'd have flashbacks and no clue what they were about. Nightmares that would have me waking up in screaming fits. I dealt with it. (Lies...I existed.)

In 1991, my husband received orders to go to Korea for a year and I couldn't go with him. Just lost my father, my sister and her children were gone, and now the United States of America needed my husband in Korea and I could not go. How wonderful!

I stopped taking the fertility meds – what was the point?

Desert Storm caused a shortage of qualified soldiers in his MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) in Korea, otherwise soldiers don't typically go from one overseas duty station (Alaska is considered overseas by military definition) to another like that.

We drove the Al-Can Hwy (Alaskan-Canadian Highway) from Fairbanks Alaska all through Canada to the US border, then down to Phoenix, Arizona, where my sister was living at the time.

It was difficult saying goodbye to my husband, but at least I had my sister, her husband, and their kids.

During that year he was gone, I didn't do so well. I worked with those with developmental disabilities, but I also floundered a lot. I got hurt often because I was often up in my head rather than paying attention to what I needed to be doing. Of course I didn't know I had ADHD – I didn't think there was anything wrong with me. You know, besides the debilitating headaches I was getting.

The migraines came on with a vengeance in my early twenties. Doctors did what they could to help, but the headaches were intensely painful and I wouldn't be able to leave the house for days until they would pass. My vision and hearing were so sensitive, the slightest sound or sliver of light made me cry.

During this time, I came to realize that my relationship with my first husband was over. I didn't have the same feelings I once had for him, and my abandonment issues were strong in those days. Having him leave like that? It didn't matter, to my brain, that it wasn't his choice. All that mattered was that he left me.

Eventually, I went to Michigan because I missed my mother's family. I spent time with them, but the headaches were awful, and then, there was an incident where a man sexually assaulted me and nobody believed me. Or, more accurately, they were minimizing what he did. Of course I didn't call the police – why would I? I had been trained in the “art” of avoidance my whole life. Besides, it felt as though no one ever listened.

Not too long after that, I tried to kill myself.

I was in the psych ward when they called my husband back from Korea. I started opening up about my past, a little, in that psych ward. Some of my family came to see me, surprised by some of the trauma I experienced as a child.

I distinctly remember my maternal grandmother saying, “I never knew. I'm so sorry. I never knew.”

Of course they didn't know – I didn't tell anyone until after my step-grandfather died when I was 16. Are you kidding me? He threatened to kill me and my family if I did.

They gave me a pass from the hospital when my husband got back from Korea, and we went to a hotel. I got pregnant.

Oh I know when I got pregnant, it was extraordinarily easy to figure out, given how long I was in the hospital and that the only time I had sex was with my husband at that hotel. There was no other time it could have happened. I went back in the hospital for another two weeks after he returned.

We stayed with my family and didn't have sex while we were there. Then, off to Killeen, Texas, our next duty station. I found out I was pregnant within a month of arriving.

Pregnancy wasn't easy on me. I was alone and didn't know anyone. I experienced intense nightmares, and though I went to therapy, I stopped taking medications altogether when I found out I was pregnant. That meant suffering through migraines, depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms, all while trying to grow a baby alongside an emotionally distant husband.

By my fifth month, I was diagnosed with gallstones. I actually thought I was in early labor because of the pain, but nope – infected gallbladder and gallstones. It was a battle – my blood pressure shot up high. I also had a difficult time eating and holding it down, so they eventually took me to San Antonio, Texas, where they stuck a tube down my nose to feed me. I had several IVs and received special nutrition through a port in my chest. Eventually, they figured out if they gave me a Phenergan suppository (an anti-nausea medication), I could hold

down food and was able to go home.

It only took a few months later that I was actually in labor. Irregular labor was messing with my blood pressure and they admitted me. They didn't want to stop the labor, but I wasn't having contractions regularly. They monitored me for a while before deciding to send me to Temple, Texas, a civilian hospital, so I could have the baby after three days of labor.

I was airlifted there by helicopter. When I arrived and they wanted to do an ultrasound, I insisted they didn't tell me the gender because I wanted to be surprised.

First, they tried Pitocin, a form of Oxytocin that helps induce labor. My cervix still didn't efface (slough off layers so it could dilate), though the contractions were regular.

They gave me an epidural. I kept telling them it still hurt, but they told me it was pressure. They were wrong, and they also weren't listening.

Eventually, after the fourth day of labor, they popped the amniotic sac to try to help move the labor further along further, I still wasn't effacing. My blood pressure was going wild, and I was developing a fever, but I sure wasn't dilating. My cervix wasn't changing at all. My husband watched cartoons as I suffered through labor pains while being told it was just pressure that I felt. By the fifth day, they decided they needed to do a c-section. They were losing her heartbeat, I had a fever, and my blood pressure was rising.

No one was listening to me when I told them how much pain I was in, not even my husband, but they listened when they went to put the bolus shot into the epidural and I almost stroked

out because the epidural line had infiltrated my spine. That's why I was feeling pain – because I wasn't getting the effects. The needle was just lolling around in there getting into my bloodstream; affecting our daughter.

They pushed my husband out of the delivery room and put me under general anesthesia in order to deliver our daughter in a hurry. I woke up in a lot of pain, but not one person apologized for not listening to me.

Five days before Christmas 1992, they delivered our daughter into my arms. Our little miracle baby – the one conceived without the fertility medications doctors said I needed, on a chance weekend away from a psych ward with my then-husband.

Chapter 3

I don't know how to say this other than I was an awful mother – allowing my psychological issues to go untreated for far too long was disastrous. I was paranoid I'd hurt her, Scared I was feeding her wrong. I would get nightmares and flashbacks, and I'd just want to escape from all the emotional pain I was feeling.

But here was this child, and she needed me. I tried to hold on to her, and I did what I could, but it was off to the psych wards with me. I couldn't handle it: I started seeing my mother and hearing my paternal step-grandfather. Full-on hallucinations.

None of the medications they were giving me helped. I was either too sensitive or it was just ineffective. I honestly thought I'd never get out of the abyss. I don't remember much of anything from when she was born until she was two – I wish I did – but there are snippets, moments when I remember holding her and the overwhelming love I felt for her. I also remember how much that love scared me.

Sometime around when she was two, I started escaping to the bars. I'd long ago left my first husband, though we were still married. I'd meet men, pick them up, find one that fit, and stay with them as long as I could – that was my MO.

While my husband remained in Texas, I had a decent relationship with him, and he would allow me to see her when I could. I did so when I felt stable, but that wasn't often.

Eventually, in 1994, he left the Army and moved to Michigan, taking our daughter with him. I didn't object; I had no business trying to raise a child. I was a mess, still going in and out of psych wards. From 1994 to 1997, I spent more than a year-and-a-half in psych wards, though I don't remember much of it. In 1995, I visited Michigan, stayed with family and had a wonderful time with her, but I continued to struggle keeping the flashbacks and nightmares under control.

My mind was a mess, and the medications were not helping, period. Nothing they gave me helped. The therapy? What a joke, I didn't even feel like they were listening to me. It was like they just kept wanting to give me more pills. I was tired of taking pills, frankly.

I think it was 1996 that I tried to go live with my sister in Arizona. That did not go well – we fought, a lot. I was in a psych ward a while, then I went back to Texas. By 1997, I gave up the pills – I had enough. But I didn't give up the bars or the men.

By 1998, my first husband filed for divorce and for full custody of our daughter. I didn't fight it – I did, however, get married, very briefly, for about six months in 1998. I was working as a waitress in a Tex-Mex place to pay my bills. I was seeing this guy – it wasn't serious – but then I started bleeding.

Turns out I had a fibroid growing in my uterus, a fibroid big enough that I needed a hysterectomy. My years of neglecting my health by only focusing on what my psychiatrist said turned into a big problem. I hadn't had a period in years, but I thought nothing of it, until I wouldn't stop bleeding. Seems my PCOS got worse too – the doctor said my ovaries were the size of tennis balls.

If I took off of work, I couldn't afford my apartment, and I couldn't just give up my apartment and move in with the man I was seeing because he had a morality clause in his lease. I married him so we could live together.

The hysterectomy didn't go well. I kept my ovaries, but they cut them in half. And I lost a lot of blood due to the sheer amount of scar tissue I had from the c section.

I was alone most of my 10-day recuperation. That marriage lasted six months, total.

I'm no longer a pornographer, but if I were to write about the time I left my second husband until I met my third, there would be a lot of it. So, let's leave it there, shall we? I didn't get a lick of psychiatric help during this time. Oh no – I had long given up on their pharmacology and empty style of listening.

When I met my third husband, he was very different from the other men I've ever been with; gregarious and funny with a dark side built from a war fought in a foreign land – Desert Storm. We danced – oh, did we dance. That man could trickle me across the floor, and I was flush with his attentiveness. All the other men I had been with were stoic and quiet, and that's what appealed to me about him – he was not like the others.

I was living at a chicken farm since breaking it off with my second husband, and taking care of a disabled vet. I was attempting to get away from the grind of going to bars every weekend, and while I lived there I discovered my love of gardening and working with animals.

I left the farm to live with him, and we lived together in Killeen, Texas for a while. Then I went

to visit my daughter and I missed her so much I knew I just had to move there. Upon returning home from that trip, I convinced my then-boyfriend to move with me.

He went up first to find a job, while I stayed behind to sell our stuff so we'd have enough money to move. Once I had done that, I had to wait for him to find us a place to live. In the meantime, it was in the early aughts, and the internet was new. The friend who told me about the site but didn't prepare me for all the naked pictures I'd see. Even with how slow dial-up was in those days, like how it could take an hour to download a picture sometimes, it was still a lot of nakedness. The site was called AdultFriendFinder. I was an immature "thirtysomething" who didn't know what she wanted from life, lonely and living in Texas.

I never met anyone when I used it in Texas – are you kidding me? I was such a scaredy cat because the internet was so new and I had a boyfriend. The news was filled with stories, friends were telling me stories – bad things that happened to people who met others on the internet. However, I did go online, peruse a lot of profiles, and chat with other users while he was away.

I joined him in Michigan a few months later, and didn't think about the site again until much later.

My first husband remarried in the time since our divorce, to a woman that I don't have nice things to say about, but I won't say anything about that at all.

I was refused visitation, and I spent hours looking up information on how to file for it. I didn't have a lawyer, and I did all the paperwork myself. I eventually got that visitation – supervised,

at first, by a friend of my daughter's stepmother. The friend liked me, though, and wrote glowing reviews to the judge.

I was going to school to become a paralegal at this time, but unfortunately, due to a multitude of issues with my mental health, I left with a 4.0 GPA after 8 months.

However, this was still the early aughts, and times were different. The judge refused to allow me to have overnight visits with my daughter as long as I was not married to the man I was living with. I had to choose: to find a place to live with my limited funds or to get married. I was working with people with developmental disabilities at this time and my funds weren't high, I got married.

Do you think my first husband and his wife allowed my daughter to come to the wedding?

They said she could, then backed out of that at the last minute. I threw together a wedding, at a church, complete with reception and traditional dress, in three weeks.

Both of us knew we shouldn't have gotten married, but we did it anyway. We did it so I could spend time with my daughter – every other weekend when I was off of work. I had to work some challenging hours to make those weekends come to fruition, like 16-hour shifts with eight hours off in between each. But I did it – I made it happen, and I enjoyed every moment I had with her.

Then they started not being there when I'd go to pick her up for a visit. I'd file contempt charges, but the judge would do nothing. He wasn't listening.

Numerous factors played into the hands of my third and final marriage failing. The marriage ended in 2002, with me cowardly packing up all my things and leaving him a note. Even today I can't fully explain why I chose this route – fear of confrontation is the most likely reason. In hindsight, given my history of running when things become difficult, it's not all that surprising either.

As my relationship was in its final death throes, I signed back up to AdultFriendFinder. I was looking for another escape, this time from a relationship that wasn't serving my needs emotionally. That's not to say I was serving *his* needs – my failures as a wife belong to me alone.

As a serial monogamist who spent her younger years picking up men in bars until one "fit," the site was much more expeditious. The landscape of the internet changed since I used it in Texas due to the introduction of high-speed, though that was still in its early years. The speeds were faster, there were more commerce websites, pictures could be downloaded quickly, webcams became a "thing," and dating sites were no longer being portrayed as dangerous on the news.

Like many dating sites of the early aughts – and, frankly, today – the men would just come pouring into my inbox. I was like a kid in a candy store, spoiled with choices. So many decisions, and I made them fast, meeting lots of men and having adult fun that never filled the void – as a seriously stubborn woman, I struggled to learn some lessons.

Eventually, in 2003, I met another man and we connected. It took time, but I moved in with him. I spent time getting to know his children, his ex-wife, and her new boyfriend, and we lived

across the street from one another cohesively, successfully co-parenting for two years. I left the site again during this time.

Though my mental health wasn't nearly as bad as it was in my twenties, throughout my thirties I still had flashbacks, periods of deep depression, nightmares, and anxiety. It didn't help that I was in this seemingly endless battle to just be able to see my daughter with her stepmother.

I'd drive 40 miles, one way, at the allotted time, just to find out they weren't there. I'd keep filing contempt charges, and the judge kept doing nothing.

One time, my car broke down on the way to his home and they filed contempt charges against me for not showing up. My cell phone wasn't getting a signal, they lived out in the boonies, and it was the middle of winter in Michigan. What was I supposed to do, walk there?

In late 2004, my maternal grandmother injured her shoulder and needed full-time care. Alongside other members in our family, I helped take care of her, while also working with people with developmental disabilities. There came a point when I needed some time off, and I asked a friend to take care of my grandmother while I decompressed. The next morning, I received a panicked phone call from that friend telling me my grandmother had died.

My grandfather was fully submerged in his dementia by this point, and he didn't last more than eight months after my grandmother passed. I was in so much pain from the loss of them, and lost in my grief –it felt like I was losing another part of my mother. By the summer of 2005, to cope with the pain of all that loss, I started thinking about returning to the site – I found I

hadn't quite filled the chasm left behind by my past through this man alone.

Things with my daughter weren't going well either. They started calling Child Protective Services on me, telling them I wasn't feeding her, which was completely ridiculous. My first husband and his wife also filed papers with the court saying I sent her home with black mold. I put sunscreen on her and she was wearing a black shirt – that was supposed to be the “black mold.”

For those who may be wondering how I got around the marriage clause in my visitation agreement during this time, the man I was living with worked nights at a casino in Detroit as a pit boss. He was never there overnight when she was.

Eventually, the court ordered a social worker to talk with us. I remember the report vividly – how her grades were suffering, how she was being made to choose between her love of me and her stepmother, how she was obviously suffering due to having me in her life. It was as I feared – me being around her did hurt her.

I remember the motion filed where they were trying to take away my visitation, and yes, folks, I gave up. I gave up all visitation. I just couldn't fight anymore. I was falling apart mentally.

When I went back to the site, I met some people, did some things, and discovered new parts of my sexuality, such as being attracted women as well as men, and kink. I found the blogs and read voraciously – reading has long been something I was drawn to do. This is where I learned about polyamory, a relationship style that intrigued me. The pit boss agreed to try it, and, after setting boundaries, we went off to seek new relationships with the full consent of

the other.

Around 2006, I found the chatrooms – this is where I could connect with users more local to me. There were meet and greets and lots of chatter in there, almost all day – members talking about a variety of subjects, from sex to their day to planning the next meet. That said, there was also a lot of drama. *Whew.*

Conversations would often be:

Member 1: “Are there any parties this weekend?”

Member 2: “Yes.”

Member 1: “Which bar?”

Member 3: “Anyone want to watch me cam?”

Member 4: ““Is so-and-so going? If they're going I don't want to go.”

Member 2: “Joe's Bar. I don't know if they're going.”

Member 5: “Anyone looking to get laid tonight? My phone number is 555-555-5555.”

Member 4: “Can someone find out if they're going?”

Member 5: “Where's the party?”

I'm sure you get the picture.

During this time, my daughter's father decided he wanted to move to Georgia, but he had to “make nice” with me to get me to agree to him moving away, even though I had given up visitation. He did, and I was promised all kinds of things, like her being brought back to Michigan to visit me often, if I would just let him move.

I was able to spend time with her and enjoy it before they left. Of course I agreed to let her go, because I thought that was what was best. I still didn't deal with all my issues of the past, though I tried. I just couldn't find a therapist I connected with enough to really delve into it all.

My daughter came to visit me once. We, the pit boss and I, had to put up her stepmother and half-sisters so that I could spend time with her. That was the last time I saw her, until 2012. Though we tried to stay in contact through phone, it wasn't working out, and the conversations dwindled.

In 2007, I met another man on AdultFriendFinder, Pete, who lived in Michigan and who I'm still with to this day. We bonded quickly, had a strong connection, and I thoroughly enjoyed conversing with him. At this time, my relationship with the pit boss, my nesting partner (this is what we call it in the polyamory community when you live with someone with whom you're not married) was going well.

It didn't take long before the pit boss was faltering, though. He was breaking the boundaries we set, I wasn't sure if I could continue our relationship when, in 2008, he burst in to tell me he had found another woman and it was over between us.

Yeah, I fell apart. I left the site, though I wasn't gone long, maybe six months. When I came back, it wasn't to escape a relationship – I was still trying to fill the void.

The site hadn't changed much in my view – there were still chatrooms, and it seemed, the same revolving cast of characters in it. The picture quality had gotten better over the years, but the functionality of the site had dwindled. I didn't return to the chatrooms, but I continued to meet people until I met the next man I felt I had a strong connection with. I left the site again, not to return for years.

He had a traumatic brain injury (TBI), was sweet, and I enjoyed his company. We spent a lot of time together, going on trips – up north to his parent's cabin, to Alabama to visit his grandmother, to Arizona to visit his parents. He also had a temper and a drinking problem, and I was no piece of cake to live with, given all of my mental health issues.

When the relationship ended in 2011, for complicated reasons that fell on both our shoulders, I joined the site again.

My paternal grandmother passed away in 2011, though I can honestly say it wasn't quite as big of a shock for me as losing my other grandparents – perhaps I was just used to losing people at that point, as sad as that is to say.

In late 2011, I met a man on a different dating site. He was a computer genius, and we went out for a few dates, but there was no chemistry for me. I told him so – he didn't like that very much.

The man started texting me, non-stop. Death threats. Calling me names. He'd be parked in the parking lot of my apartment complex, telling me he would kill me. He'd bang on my door while I'd be trying to sleep.

I eventually called the police, and they came and took a report. He was arrested days later.

I couldn't stay in my apartment – I was too scared – so I moved in with friends who lived in the same apartment building.

Not too long after that, I got a phone call from a man my daughter was living with – I didn't even know she wasn't living with her father anymore. The man told me my daughter needed a place to stay, and I didn't hesitate, paying for her ticket to get to Michigan to come live with me.

I began seeing another man from the apartment complex during this time. I'm sure it was because I didn't feel safe – he was an alcoholic, and I was living with untreated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and ADHD. Of course it wasn't a match – who did I think I was kidding?

She came to live with me, but it was soon untenable, not because of anything she did, but because the situation I put myself in was completely toxic. Not only to me, but to her, and I couldn't have my behavior hurting her. I asked if she could go live with her friend.

Nothing ever got worked out, that stalker dude was off probation, and my then-boyfriend was a raging alcoholic. Time for me to run, very far away, to Florida.

I was still seeing Pete, whom I'd met in 2007, though he remained in Michigan when I left for Florida. He was – and still is – wonderful and supportive, respectful of my boundaries, and always just a phone call away. Our relationship was strong.

But I still had this mountain of pain that I hadn't fully healed from. Pete's love couldn't fix what was broken in me, and the pain was weighing on me, dragging me down paths of self-debasement at the hands of men I barely knew.

That's when the blogging began.

Chapter 4

A few days after Jon's call, my computer chimed. Google Meets notification – Ali, the senior vice president of operations.

Ali's face appeared on screen. Professional, friendly, ready to talk business.

"Hello, Debbi."

"Hello, Ali. Can you hear me?" Technical difficulties right out of the gate. My microphone was muted, my fan whirring in the oppressive Florida heat. I fumbled with settings, feeling ridiculous. "Can you hear me better now?"

"Yes," he said. "I can hear you now."

"Nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, too."

Ali got straight to it: "Jon called Monday and mentioned he spoke with you about potentially helping us. I'd like to discuss the possibilities further."

We discussed what kind of work they had available. Technical stuff – definitely not. I was self-

taught, the friend everyone called for computer help, but I didn't know enough to troubleshoot webcams or debug code professionally.

"I'd prefer customer service. I know some IT basics, but not enough to do it as a job. "

Ali understood. "Jon brought up maybe community moderation."

"I would be really good at that," I said immediately. "Because I used to spend a large part of my day in the community."

Used to. Before they banned me. Looking at my reflection in the screen in front of me, I could see the fury in my eyes.

"Okay. Okay. Alright. So now let's – you know, Jon said that maybe you will be willing to work for us."

"Yeah. I said *maybe*. And it really kinda depends on the terms and stuff like that, because I am – and I wanna be real, real honest with you – I haven't worked in a long time. I had a heart attack..."

He cut me off. "No. No worries. Okay. We can make it so that, you know, it's only for the hours that you worked. Like, for example, you can only do one hour per week. "

Just like that. No pushback, no concern, no "but we need someone full-time." They were willing to work around me.

"Oh, no," I said. "I could do way more than that. I'm more interested in more like 20 hours, and just keep it topped off at that."

Ali explained they could make it contractual instead of employee status. Then his tone shifted.

"Now I want to address certain things with you. Okay?"

"Absolutely."

"Now I'm the type of guy who doesn't take threats well. Okay?"

My stomach dropped slightly. *Threats*. Was he talking about my anger after the ban? The things I said in the letter where I claimed I wouldn't come back without him gone? The cats started getting rowdy in the background, but I was focused in on the conversation we were having.

"Okay. "

"So when communicating – so if you're gonna be working and then, you know, addressing people on the side. You know, I want you to be able to control your emotions."

I understood. Personal Debbi – the woman who'd called the CEO a loser, who'd raged about censorship, who'd helped rally 40 people to co-sign an open letter – that Debbi couldn't exist if I took this job.

Professional Debbi had to emerge: measured, diplomatic, the bridge between the company

and the community.

"I'm much different in a work setting than I am in a personal setting. I will make that very clear, okay? I know how to purport myself in a business setting so that I'm not – anybody."

"Yeah. That's great."

"The other thing is, you know – and this is a challenge even for me – a lot of times, I may not agree with some of the things companies want to do."

"And...for you know, if...but if you're working for the company – "

"That's their decision," I interrupted, as the cat jumped on my lap and another one began pacing on the desk.

"Yeah. It's their...yeah...he company's decision, and you kinda support that and try not to talk about...talk bad about it."

And we were. I understood what they were asking of me: support the company publicly, even when I disagreed privately. Be the liaison, not the critic.

I thought about the community. The people I'd left behind. The relationships severed by my ban. Maybe I could be more effective from the inside, to advocate for changes instead of raging about them in blog posts. To actually help.

Or maybe I was rationalizing selling out.

"I just need to talk to some other people to get this process moving along, " he said.

He talked about their challenges. The constant balancing act between members, business needs, and investor demands. I wanted to believe him. Maybe I was being naive, but something about the way he talked – the frustration in his voice about impossible choices, the acknowledgment that they couldn't always do what members wanted – it felt honest.

Or I was already being manipulated. I couldn't take my mind off how hot it was in the room without the fan, and the cats were running around chasing each other, as they do.

"Alright, that's good," he said. "So what I'll do after this conversation is reactivate your account." My account. The one they'd terminated three months ago. "Give me about roughly 24 hours to get everything squared away."

We discussed next steps. Ali needed to talk to Alex, my potential supervisor, to make sure he was on board. They'd create a job description, and if I agreed to their proposal, we'd start the process.

"Okay, alright," I said. "You have a good day."

"You too. And I will be talking to you soon. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"Nice to meet you too. Take care. Bye."

"Bye."

I turned the fan on and shooed the cat off of my lap. It was just too hot – he was making my legs sweat.

Twenty-four hours after Ali's call, my account was reactivated.

Despite the weirdness, despite the doubt, I wanted to be back in the community, to try to make things better. I had to see if I could actually help, instead of just complaining from the outside.

Ali emailed to let me know the contract would be sent over by the end of the week. I was really doing this. I was really going to work for AdultFriendFinder.

Something about this felt right, despite the fear. Like all the pieces of my life – the trauma, the recovery, the heart attack, the exile, the therapy, the garden, the writing – had been leading to this moment. To purpose – using everything I'd learned, everything I'd overcome, to actually help people instead of just writing about helping myself.

My journey as a blogger was one of evolution – I began as a pornographer, taking half-naked pictures of myself and telling stories about the adventures I had meeting people on the site.

The first blog post I ever wrote detailed a casual encounter with a man I met from the site. It

was poorly and briefly written, with a lot of punctuation errors, but I had a small following of people who liked my playful, conversational style of writing.

Many of the other bloggers talked about bigger things – what was going on in the world around us, or more academic topics such as sexuality and kink. There were other people posting pictures of themselves and writing erotica – I certainly wasn't the only one – but I was probably the only one talking about the sheer number of people I was meeting, though.

I met another man from AdultFriendFinder in Spring 2013 – I will call him J. Our relationship was passionate, deeply passionate. We would spend entire weekends together – I would cook, he would clean, and we would have a good time together. Though I knew most of the bloggers weren't interested in erotica, some were interested in the sex I was having with J. And, sex is what I knew best, or at least that is what I used to believe.

I briefly tried camming on-site. The men were disrespectful to me, so I stopped. Meanwhile, I was attempting to maintain a long-distance relationship with Pete in Michigan. While I was still seeing both men, I started on a toxic positivity kick, where I tried to avoid my problems by pretending they didn't bother me, while still writing erotica about my sexual adventures with J.

That toxic positivity thing often looked like this blog post:

“Happiness is not a destination, it's a choice.

Listen, I get bombarded daily with negative ‘shit.’ I hear it on TV, where I live, on FB, on here...I hear it everywhere. And I get mired in it. I do, I'm more than willing to accept the fact

that I let others' shit 'get' to me. I'm overly sensitive that way, and sometimes it takes me a little time to re-center myself.

All my life, people have described me as 'too sensitive.' I realize that I have to learn to better separate myself from that of others, but it's that sensitivity that has kept me in tune. It is also what's helped me create my happiness.

Happiness is a choice. I have to remember to wake up every single day and choose to be happy. I have to do my best not to allow my happiness to depend on anything. I'm not happy because _____. I'm just happy because I'm me.

I'm still faltering and learning in this journey called life. I continue to allow others' emotions to affect me. But I came back; I figured out how to separate it. And remember the same principal time and time again...happiness is a choice and not a destination. I'm not happy because my life is perfect or I have more toys than my neighbor, I'm not happy because I am making a lot of money, or have a successful career. I'm happy because I'm me and that's enough."

Delusional much, Deb?

I'm not saying that you don't have choices in life; I'm saying bad things happen all the time, and pretending you're happy when bad things are happening? That's a recipe for disaster for your mental health. It sure was mine.

In late 2013, I met another man on a different site, the man I still live with today, my current nesting partner, Nick. A strong, caring man with a protective streak a mile long. Genuinely

empathetic and kind, his personality shines like a star, along with his dry wit and deadpan delivery. Another with PTSD born from war: Desert Storm.

The blogs were different then. There were many more bloggers, and the site's blogging platform had become glitchy. Things weren't working correctly – there would be missing words in blog posts, you had to make the first comment yourself or no one would see your post, etc.

There were blog awards like "Best New Blogger." We would vote on them, and awards, such as badges you could place in the signature of your blog, would be given. There were also blog wars.

During those early years of blogging, I had many commenters, but I still felt like I was on the outside looking in. I spent many years feeling like I didn't belong places, and I didn't realize it was my own behavior causing my issues with bonding. I failed to be authentic, writing blog posts saying I didn't regret doing things I so clearly did.

Life went along, though I still found myself discontented. Not as much as before, but there were still parts of myself that felt broken. My daughter was angry because I moved to Florida, feeling like I was running away from her. I wasn't, but I also wasn't comfortable telling her about the stalker.

I met another blogger who was camming elsewhere, and she told me about it. I joined. When I say camming, I do mean getting naked and masturbating on camera in front of hundreds, if not thousands, of people sometimes. I don't want to go too deeply into what I did – once again, I am no longer a pornographer. I entertained men, on camera, twice a week, for two

years, and they paid me for it.

When it came to customers, there were “good ones” and there were “bad ones,” but in the end, I couldn't bring myself to perform any longer. I needed to be real. I left the site again, focused on my relationships with J, Nick, and Pete, and didn't spend too much time worrying about writing.

I went back to the site to blog again somewhere late 2015 to early 2016 and I tried to tell my life story. That was a disaster; I ended up with so many flashbacks and nightmares. I was struggling to stay organized, and my life felt as though it was falling apart again.

I managed to take a trip up to see Pete in Michigan in July 2016 and visit one of my blogger friends in Delaware. Not too long after that, J decided he wanted children, and I could not, nor did I want to, provide that to him.

I left the site after J and I broke up. I couldn't do it anymore; I couldn't pretend to be happy. I wasn't happy – I was miserable.

I tried a lot of things to take my mind off the site, off the world, and off of what was going on in my brain. I tried to write a book about a psycho cam girl who got pushed over the edge and started killing her customers. Couldn't focus. I returned to the site in 2019 on a wave of PTSD-induced psychosis. My sister had come to live with me, bringing flashbacks and trauma-related breakdowns. Fights between us culminated in me kicking her out of my house. I was attempting to write my way through it, and I'm sure people were confused. I read some of that stuff today and I'm embarrassed – I have gone so far as to hide it from view.

I began to realize I needed to be a student of my mental illness, rather than a victim. I started doing research and paying attention to how I felt. I also returned to therapy, as I needed help overcoming my past trauma. Writing was helping, connecting was helping, but I needed more. I needed professional help. Once I found a good therapist, my mental health only continued to get better.

BAM.

I was hit with a heart attack in September of 2020, on Nick's birthday.

Chapter 5

Here is the story I wrote for my blog about that experience:

"I have started and erased several intros to this story because I am struggling, still, with what I've been through this week. It's been surreal, my friends...I feel as though I've lived through one of those slow-building medical drama television shows. You know, like Grey's Anatomy or something.

You know, I'm this youngish, hip, incredibly sexy woman (let me live my fucking fantasy, it's been a difficult week, mmmkay?) who goes to the emergency room, thinking I may have been infected by the pandemic currently plaguing our world, only to find out that I actually had a heart attack and need minor surgery. Then, complications ensue to a dramatic climax with an eventual 'happy' ending.

So, let me stop hyping up what happened and just tell you all how it all went down. It was September 2020, Nick's birthday, a Thursday night. I was lying in bed watching television when I started feeling a pain in my chest. That pain moved to my neck, and I started sweating. There was a tightness to my chest, but it wasn't like I was struggling to breathe by any means. I could take full, deep breaths without issue. No, heart attack wasn't the first thing to come to mind. I'm young...dammit. Ha.

(To be clear, it probably should have. My father passed from a heart attack at 47, and his father before him at 55.)

It wasn't like it hurt, hurt. It was more like a twinge, but add in the sweating and traveling to my neck while feeling a bit lightheaded? Yeah, I went to Nick's room and told him I thought I needed to go to the emergency room. Which, of course, concerned him.

Once hooked up to the EKG, doc came in and said:

'It looks like you had a cardiac event, but we'll need to wait for the labs to confirm. But you're definitely going to be admitted tonight, because you'll need a cardiac workup in the morning, with a stress test.'

Yeah, I was scared, but I kept my spirits up through ridiculous jokes.

I was lying on the CT table, and they're struggling to find a vein. (My arms...people...my arms are FULL of bruises. I look like a domestic abuse survivor, seriously.)

The nurse said, 'Is it okay if I stick you again? I'm so sorry.'

My answer: 'Sure, that's what I get for having such meaty arms.'

The radiology tech and nurse burst out laughing and I felt less stressed. Win-win.

The doc came back in the room after all the lab results had come in, telling me that it had been confirmed that I had experienced a mild heart attack, and that I no longer needed a

stress test...I was going straight to cardiac catheterization.

Not the happiest of news, but hey, it wasn't that bad – it was mild, and I was okay, and though I knew I was going to have to make some life changes, I wasn't worried.

I'm just going to insert here that my purple hair was the talk of the hospital. Lord, it was ego-inducing the number of compliments I got on it. Saturday morning, they did the cardiac catheterization. There was a blockage that apparently my doctor didn't see on the screen, but saw on paper after he took out the tube – yeah, don't ask, I don't know, I don't get it either. So, I needed a stent, and had to have another procedure to put it in.

Whatever – the food sucked, but the people were pleasant. If I had to do it again, I had to do it again – I sure wasn't going to say no. There was an 80% blockage in one of my vessels that needed fixing, and damned if I wasn't going to allow them to repair it.

Sunday morning, another visit to the cardiac lab. This time, they put in the stent and sent me to the floor with the sheath still in my femoral artery. All went well in terms of the surgery, and I was on track to a full recovery.

UNTIL...it came time to take out the sheath.

So, look, I almost died. Not hyperbole, no joke, totally serious – I was so close to death that they couldn't get a blood pressure, and I...well...I actually was so fucking scared that I was screaming until I could scream no more.

It boils down to the fact that, because they couldn't find my pulse in my foot, the nurse let up on the pressure too much after removing the sheath that was in my femoral artery. Blood was shooting everywhere, and my groin blew up to the size of a volleyball. It was a...thing...a whole...shebang.

I was sweating so profusely, I felt like I had just gotten out of the shower. Doctors were flying into the room like worker bees after the code was called. In no time, there were like 20 people in my room.

Nurses were trying to reassure me. People were asking me how I felt, and the only thing I could come up with between the screams is 'weird.' Because, ya know, that shit hurt too...let me tell you...whew, I was in some pain.

They told me I'd blown my artery and needed vascular surgery to repair it. I signed forms, and off to the OR I went, where they tried to get in a foley catheter and a special form of IV that goes in your artery. They couldn't, however, because due to the fact that I lost over half of my blood volume, they couldn't find an artery.

I'm not ashamed to say that as that mask went over my face, I literally took breaths as deeply I could. I wanted out of that reality. It was...intense, traumatic, and fucking scary as hell.

I woke up experiencing rather intense pain coming from my groin. But it was over, and I knew I was going to be okay.

I started making jokes again.

ICU Nurse: 'How do you feel?'

'Like shit, but my hair is on point.' Told ya...ego. LOL.

There was a bruise encompassing my entire left side of groin, from my pubic mons to my inner thigh. I had staples from where they did the artery repair, and a hole from the drain to release the blood that filled my groin and thigh.

However, independent me couldn't stand to ask for help to do basic human things, and by Monday I started begging to go home.

Didn't happen. I spent the next few days in ICU, drifting in and out on pain meds.

I'm okay, I'm alive. But I'm also going to need a lot of time to recover. A whole lot more than I originally thought.

I tire easily, walk slowly and delicately due to the pain, and am still getting used to having to taking so many pills. I hate pills.

The amount of people who have looked at my groin up close and personal this week is staggering. I'm again hairless due to the fact that they have to shave you for the cardiac cath. Plus, I had a disinfectant wipe sponge bath from a young man that could be somebody's fantasy, but the experience truly felt incredibly ridiculous. This has led me to the conclusion that any sense of modesty I may have possessed is long gone.

I finally talked them into letting me come home. They removed all the things, and I got home last night, with only the energy to pet my cat and watch TV. Walking, right now, is a chore, and I have restrictions a mile long on the amount of activity I'm allowed to do.

But the truth? I don't have the energy to do much, anyway.

So, I didn't have any near-death experiences other than the screaming, but as an agnostic/realist/skeptic, I wouldn't expect to. What I do have, though, is a greater sense of gratitude for just being alive. I'm happy to just be here in my bed, able to coherently relate this story. Because boy oh boy, I almost bled out on a Sunday afternoon, and the only reason I'm here to write this is because 20 people dropped everything and ran into my room.

Be grateful for life, please...you can't know what tomorrow will bring."

I posted that story to my blog. I didn't know it yet, but something fundamental had shifted – nearly dying had cracked something open in me that I'd kept sealed for decades. I was about to stop performing and start being *real*. It was like the old me didn't exist – that person who hated herself? She was no longer there.

Both Nick and Pete were there for me through the recovery – Nick was physically present, making sure I rested and healed, and Pete called from Michigan, keeping my spirits up, reminding me I was stronger than I thought.

That's what my polyamorous life gave me: multiple sources of unwavering love and support, each relationship meeting different needs, and each person showing up in their own way.

I was lucky to have them both, lucky to have built a life where love wasn't limited or hierarchical, where I could receive support from multiple people who genuinely cared about my well-being.

As I healed from the heart attack, I realized I needed to heal from everything else, too. The performance had to stop, and the authenticity had to begin.

When I returned to the site after that ordeal in October of 2020, I came back with a vengeance. I started being more real with people, and they started responding positively – and my follower count grew. I don't know that it was a conscious decision at that point, but I do know that due to those factors the shift was already beginning in my blogging.

Since I began gardening and growing my own produce, I started a series called "Friday Farm Day," where I would post pictures of my ever-expanding garden. I explained plants and how they functioned, and how I learned to garden by watching YouTube videos – I could probably go on for hours about how feeling connected to the earth and the soil grounds me in a way I hadn't experienced in the past. That series continues to be one of my most popular series today.

I also continued writing blog posts about my real life, my recovery from the heart attack, and I shared about being in therapy again. As I grew in front of their eyes people responded positively, and I was getting noticed by some of the more talented (in my opinion) writers on the site.

By December of 2021, I started another series called "Court of AFF Opinion." It was silly questions like "Is a hot dog a sandwich?" and "Is cereal soup?" It became popular for a while, until I started running out of questions to ask that wouldn't cause actual arguments. Also at that time, Andrew, the founder of AdultFriendFinder, came back to the site to open a new "Community."

Andrew is a computer programmer who wrote all the original code for the site. He was trying to lure the bloggers into the new Community, but it wasn't going well. I tried it out, liked it much better than the old format, and started rallying for all the bloggers to come over and start posting to the new blogs rather than the old ones.

I wasn't the only one doing the encouraging the transition; there were many others. Jon was the CEO, but Andrew is whom we spoke to about the bugs and other issues we found in the Community, and during that year we helped him fine-tune the new. It was an extraordinary time, seeing the community come together to rally behind starting something new.

In February of 2022, one of the bloggers I respected, a retired politics professor in the UK, asked if he could interview me. Upon finishing that interview, he and I became fast friends and are still close to this day. The professor and I have a sibling-like relationship where we tease one another incessantly about "cat support" and make up little stories about our cat parenting skills. It's all in good fun. We have a cat "child" together we're coparenting. His name? Zelensky.

In the Community, levels are earned through participation points. Writing blog posts, comments, replies, reacting to post/comments/replies, and so forth. Andrew felt once you got

to level seven, you would know the rules well enough and therefore become a member of his “Senate,” as he called it. This was Club 7. Most of us who helped him form the community back in those days were already a seven, so it was a win for us to have our content go live instantly.

By the middle of 2022, the old blogs were shut down completely, and everyone had to use the new ones. And in September of 2022, everything changed again. Andrew had been fired, according to a motion in the lawsuit filed in the California Court System in August 2023, because his system of allowing every member over the Community Level of 7 post content without having it reviewed first allowed CSAM – also know as child porn – to exist on the site. Additionally, according to that same lawsuit, he engaged in inappropriate behavior with members of the staff. The community was shut down for a week.

When we returned, content was no longer going live instantly. Andrew was gone. Things started taking a turn on the site then, and people were being censored more and more. Any time someone would write anything that was even a little bit critical of the site, they were being denied. Any talk of Andrew, denied. The community was buzzing, trying to figure out what happened with him.

Nobody from the site was giving us any information. We were all left in the dark, wondering. I was left feeling confused, abandoned, and betrayed yet again, by another person I respected. My world felt as though it was fracturing once more, and I didn't think I would make it through.

Additionally, that same month, Orlando was hit by Hurricane Ian, causing my backyard to flood. We were out of power for almost a week. Our gas had to be shut off due to a gas leak

that took almost a month to get fixed. Nick and I were showering at his mother's house.

We were all growing together, as people, in those blogs. The other bloggers and commenters interacted regularly. Blogs often function as a kind of diary, or a place where people write or post pictures of whatever interests them. Each blog has a comment section, where some of the best conversations often took place. A large group of us bloggers bonded over shared interests in things like photography, travel, nature, and any number of other subjects. There was still a lot of harmony among all of us, even though we had no clue what was going on with the site.

The discontent was beginning to show in the community. We weren't getting any answers; we weren't being told *anything*. Posts, replies, and comments were being erroneously denied by reviewers, disrupting our conversations.

By January of 2023, I started predicting that all sex sites would be required to have the IDs of their members. There were some articles I read online that were talking about how some states were considering requiring members of pornographic sites to prove they were over 18. It seems this has come to pass in many states and the UK as of today, when legislation regarding ID verification was passed requiring all sites containing certain amounts of pornography. Each state has a different threshold.

Throughout 2023, I kept blogging. The teasing wars with my UK professor friend became a highlight – we'd go back and forth in comments, making each other laugh.

The site held a meeting with several bloggers. They listened – or pretended to, I can't say for sure which. In the end, they created a blog post where we could appeal denied content. It was something, but not much really changed. I kept writing about all the site issues and my garden and cats. I kept showing up authentically. The community kept growing.

I was building toward something that couldn't be sustained. I didn't know it yet, but my willingness to speak out against the site was putting a target on my back. The site was changing, and not for the better, and my days of blogging freely on the site were numbered. But the garden posts, the recovery updates, the honest messiness of my life – people kept showing up for all of it. Maybe authenticity was enough.

Chapter 6

A week after I'd agreed to work for them, Jon called again. Another Google Meets link, another conversation that would shift my understanding of what I'd signed up for.

His face appeared on screen, looking more tired than it had during our first call.

"Hi, Debbi."

"Hi, Jon. How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you, how are you?"

As we exchanged pleasantries, I could tell something was weighing on him – this wasn't a social call.

"So, again, I'm happy that you're on the core team. Important stuff to work out with Ali." He paused. "What I want to ask you about, Debbi, believe it or not, is one of the final things you said when you spoke to me personally: you think I could work out the situation with Andrew if I wanted to."

Andrew. The founder. The programmer who'd built the site, who'd come back to create the

new Community, whom the bloggers loved. The man who'd been fired in September 2022, leaving us confused and feeling abandoned.

The man I'd reached out to during my ban, asking what was happening. The man whose wife I'd spoken with about the Trap Neuter Release rescue Nick and I were doing. The man who'd graciously offered to help fund it, no strings attached.

"Well...and he wanted to," I said carefully. "I did say both of you – or at least I think I did, and if I didn't, I did intend it to be both of you – needed to want to work it out."

Jon took a breath. "So I've got this mediation in two weeks."

"Yes. I'm aware."

I'd read the court filings. The lawsuit was public record – Jon versus Andrew, a bitter fight playing out in California courts. A friendship ending in legal warfare.

"And I think...I don't wanna go through this entire situation. Okay, so you seem fairly receptive on this. I wanna know if you had any thoughts, knowing everyone involved."

He was asking me to help. To mediate between him and Andrew. To somehow fix what had broken between them.

And suddenly I understood why Jon thought I could. I had a relationship with Andrew – not deep, but real. That connection – that established trust – that's what Jon was banking on.

"I'll be honest with you," I said, "I really don't know Andrew super super – I know him through the blogs, what he wrote in the blogs, replies and comments. And I'm very aware that you can't always know a person just based on what you read. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Yes." He seemed to be understanding.

"So, because I know my life and I know a lot of people on AFF probably think I live very differently than I do...I'm way more down to earth and kinda chill than a lot of people may think I am. So I can only base it on what I know about him through there. I think he's a reasonable guy."

I paused, thinking about Andrew's kindness with the TNR funding, his wife's warmth, his openness during my ban.

"That said, I also think you – both of you – need, in my opinion, help coming together about maybe some of the personal stuff because I don't know what happened completely. I did read all the filings that you filed recently. So I'm aware there were problems behind the scenes with inappropriate content and behavior – that's all I know for sure. Okay? I only know what's publicly available."

Jon's expression shifted slightly. The weariness deepened.

"So, I don't know how much hurt feelings he has about what went down, and I don't know how much hurt feelings you have about what's going down."

"I think his hurt feelings are...I view it more like I can't successfully work with him because, you know, I can't be the responsible party while he sort of does the other." The fatigue in his voice was audible. I could tell Jon was struggling to put into words how deeply challenging this was for him.

"No, I see what you're saying, I see what you're saying," I said as my cats ran around the room.

"And, I don't think you could have gotten the true picture of what happened. Just suspend disbelief for a second. It would be very hard to...I've got to keep this company going. I've been here nine years. It's enough, you know, it's enough."

Nine years. He sounded exhausted. Not just from this fight, but from everything.

"But any particular ideas you have?" he asked.

I thought about it. About my interactions with Andrew. About the fact that he'd reached out kindly when I'd been banned, that he'd offered help with the cats without hesitation. That showed character, didn't it? Showed he was capable of empathy, of seeing beyond business to real human need.

"My goodness. I know a friend who knows both of you very well. I could ask her. I will. I know her and I have spoken mildly because she's not...she said she's not paying attention to your court case. So I know she doesn't know a lot about it. I do know she likes you both a lot. Do you see what I'm saying? And I don't know Andrew a lot, but I do have a relationship with him

from the Community. And I reached out to him during my ban – "

"I know," Jon said. "That's part of why I think you could help."

Of course he knew. He probably knew everything about that conversation, about the TNR discussion, about Andrew's offer to help. I just didn't know why he thought I could help, and it was so freaking hot in the house it was difficult to concentrate. May in Florida is downright sauna level of heat.

"To deal with Andrew on a personal level is very different than the business level," he said.

"I am sure. I am – because I'm different on a personal – "

"He's very emotionally tied to this site. It's a very big part of his identity."

"I can see that," I said. "I've read his off-site blog or whatever. It's not really a blog; it's just a page. But I've read that, and I can tell it's entrenched into his identity quite a bit. Really entrenched."

Jon leaned forward slightly. "And just between you and me, I think he is seeking some type of redemption."

"Yeah, I think you might be right about how he made his money."

I couldn't even imagine that kind of money. Looking at the cats surrounding me on my desk, knowing how much I spent on them – that seemed astronomical. The kind of money he

made? Damn.

"You could see that too, right?" Jon nodded.

"To a certain degree, yes. Yeah. I think I see it from the standpoint of, maybe there is a lot of guilt there, that he kind of abandoned the site. And for a lot of us users who really were depending on him, we felt like we were abandoned by him."

"I don't think he abandoned you guys. I think he couldn't cope with it."

That landed hard. Andrew couldn't cope – with what? With the inappropriate content? With the responsibility? With the weight of what the site had become?

But he'd been kind to me about the cats. He'd been generous with funding for TNR. That was the Andrew I knew – the one who cared about animals, about helping, about doing good. How did that Andrew reconcile with the one Jon was describing?

"Right. And I'm not saying he couldn't cope now, okay? But he couldn't. I'll be real honest with you: I don't know."

He continued: "I couldn't. He could. He could for a while. But I think there are other people who are better at handling that stage of their life to deal with it. I just can't deal with it forever, you know? "

It was all clicking into place, forming a picture I didn't want to see. The generosity with the

cats existing alongside darker patterns I hadn't seen. Patterns with stress I recognized in myself.

"It makes it harder knowing that," I said. "Very hard. Yes. I'm just gonna be honest with you: you're asking me my honest opinion, and I'm thinking, 'Oh, I did not realize this was part of the equation here.'"

Jon looked at me through the screen, and I saw something like relief in his expression, like finally someone understood the impossible position he was in.

"I tried to tell you last time there's a lot that – "

"And I tried to respect y'all's privacy. I didn't want to kind of pry in. I'm fascinated by court cases, generally speaking."

I was making it clear that I didn't go further than what was publicly available while staring out my window wondering if my neighbors had any idea I was talking to a multimillionaire on Google Meets, of all places.

"But this court case could go either way, in my opinion," Jon said. "It's not really the heart of what's going on, it's just a bad way for both of us to spend our time."

I could tell he was tired of it all, all the fighting, all the aggravation.

"Right," I said, "it is not a good way for either of you to spend your time. And I think the judge

is looking at it saying, 'I don't wanna deal with this.'"

Jon nodded.

I continued: "I was at that motion to dismiss hearing, and she didn't seem like she was – the way I heard it was: you both are sophisticated businessmen. You can work this out. You know? This is – "

Jon interrupted me. "Like, I don't wanna do a divorce case."

"Right. Yes. Right. I mean, who wants to – who wants to air their friendship out before the press? The ending of a friendship, who wants the press to be in the middle of that?"

I could see the case from both sides, or I thought I could. It was difficult to know who to believe back then. I wanted to believe Jon, but Andrew had shown me so much kindness, as had his wife when she sent me pics from her travels of cats she'd seen.

I started making all the things that I wrote about the lawsuit private, except for the article on OnlinePersonalsWatch.com, which wasn't under my control. I could see the pain on Jon's face, and I didn't want to be a part of that pain. Multimillionaire or not, he was still a human being.

Shoot, if I couldn't be a human to the least of us, who was I really? (Kidding, I'm kidding.) Let's be real, Jon had his faults, but don't we all? He wasn't a bad guy from what I could tell.

Chapter 7

By early 2024, I was growing as a person. Between going to therapy, gardening, writing through my feelings, and connecting with other bloggers and commenters, I could feel the shift in myself. Though I still had my low points, my life felt far more authentic to the real me than the one I'd performed as for years. My thoughts were clearer, and I didn't have flashbacks anymore. I learned good sleep habits. Overall, my mood lifted on its own, though I still struggled with organization and focus. It felt amazing because I started feeling as though I didn't have that same discontent in my life.

I was also getting angrier.

Not the old anger, the destructive kind that sent me spiraling into self-debasement and bad decisions. This was different – this was righteous fury on behalf of a community being slowly strangled by incompetence and greed.

The censorship had gotten so bad that I couldn't even discuss the lawsuit on the site. Every attempt to post about the court filings, or about Andrew's case against Jon, got denied by moderation. They were actively preventing members from knowing what was happening with the company.

So I did what they couldn't stop: I opened an independent blog on a different platform,

specifically to cover the lawsuit. I called it "Debbi Uncensored," and in February 2024, I started documenting everything publicly, where they couldn't censor me.

I paid per page to download filings from PACER, the federal court system's electronic database. I read every motion, every response, every legal argument. Then I broke it down for the community in plain English.

I wasn't the only one calling Jon a weasel. I wasn't the only one hoping Andrew would win. But I was the one with the platform, the following, the credibility built over years of authentic blogging – now using all of it offsite where they couldn't silence me.

And I wasn't backing down.

Back on AdultFriendFinder, the censorship ramped up even more. It was like they'd put a target on my back and were testing how much I'd take before shutting up. I had 20 comments denied one morning, innocent comments like explaining how the site worked for a new member.

In early March, things escalated. Ms Japan, my friend, wrote a blog post. I don't remember exactly what it said, but it was critical. We all commented under it, supporting her, agreeing with her points, adding our own frustrations. But the next day, Ms Japan couldn't access her account.

My stomach dropped. "They banned her," I said to myself. "Without telling her. Without even the courtesy of an email."

My UK professor friend didn't waste time. He wrote a blog post on the site in support of Ms Japan, calling out her ban as unjust. Posted it publicly for everyone to see.

Then he was banned too. Same day. No warning, no explanation.

I walked into Nick's room. He looked up from his computer. "They banned Ms Japan," I said.

"And now they've banned my UK professor friend for writing in support of her."

Nick's expression darkened. "You know you're next, right?"

"Probably."

"So what are you going to do?"

I thought about it. About all the times in my life I'd stayed quiet to keep the peace. All the times I'd performed instead of being real. All the times I'd chosen safety over authenticity.

I went to Nick's closet and grabbed his oversized navy blazer, the one that hung off my shoulders, drowning me in fabric. Then I found a piece of paper and a marker.

Wrote in big block letters: "Hi, my name is Jon, and I'm a loser."

I walked out to my garden. My sanctuary. The place where I'd healed after nearly dying. The tomatoes were thriving, the papayas almost ready to harvest. Everything I'd grown with my own hands.

This felt right. Mocking the CEO from the place that represented my authenticity, my growth, my refusal to perform anymore.

I stood there in front of one of some of my plants, in Nick's oversized blazer, holding my sign, trying to look as ridiculous and defiant as I felt. Nick was holding my phone, centering me in the picture. The camera clicked.

I looked at the photo. Perfect. Me in an absurdly oversized blazer, surrounded by my thriving garden, holding a sign calling the CEO a loser.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

“You’re being you again.”

I laughed, and then I uploaded it to my blog on AdultFriendFinder. I hit publish, and then I sat back and waited.

I refreshed the page, watching the comments pile up. My heart was pounding – not from fear, but from exhilaration.

A few hours later, though, when I tried to log in – no dice. I tried again. Reset my password. The email never came.

They'd done it – they'd actually done it. No email. No warning. No explanation. Just locked

out, like I'd never existed.

Author wrote a post in support of Ms Japan. She was banned right around the same time I was. Four of us gone. Vocal critics with the some of the largest followings who wouldn't shut up, no matter how much they censored us.

Gone.

I tried to contact customer service. I spoke to a chat agent who could barely speak English, and who insisted the blogs were down for everyone. He gaslit me until I called him out for implying my friends were liars. Only then did he actually check my account status.

"You have been deactivated by our higher department."

"Why?"

"Someone will get back to you."

No one did. I sent emails – nothing. I waited for the courtesy of an explanation, the basic respect of being told why I'd been banned after years of contribution.

Silence.

They'd silenced me on their platform, but they couldn't silence Debbi Uncensored. I still had that.

I walked back into Nick's room.

"They banned me," I said.

He stood up, pulled me into a hug. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

I opened Debbi Uncensored, the blog I'd already been using to cover the lawsuit, and started writing about the ban:

"Never in my life did I believe things would get to this point, but here we are.

...I do not miss AFF. I miss the blogging with everyone, for sure, but I do not miss the inconsistent moderation, gaslighting by Site Support, and toxic culture currently being created by the site's actions.

Criticism is good when given constructively. We all gave constructive criticism for months and were ignored. Then they banned us, when not one of us broke the Terms of Service. Yet, there are countless criticisms of the site still left up. They banned us because we had large followings, and they wanted to shut us up rather than fix what was wrong...

Additionally, I also find I'm feeling disrespected. Disrespected by the people in charge of a website I championed for years. Jesus, I used to write constantly about how great the website was. I referred people to it, for fuck's sake...

Yes, I care about the website, I care enough to want it fixed for everyone."

Nick brought me water later that evening. Set it on my desk without a word, just squeezed my shoulder.

"You did the right thing."

My therapist would probably disagree. But Nick understood something my therapist didn't – sometimes doing the right thing means burning everything down. Sometimes the only way to stay true to yourself is to lose something you've built.

I'd spent my whole life running from confrontation, choosing escape over engagement, letting fear dictate my choices.

Not this time.

For the first time in my life, I wasn't running or hiding. There was no way I was going to pretend to be fine – because I wasn't.

They could take away my account, silence my voice on their platform, and pretend I'd never existed, but they couldn't make me sorry, nor shut me up.

I wrote an email to Andrew. I knew about the case, but I also knew he was a philanthropist, and I needed help starting the trap, neuter, and release program (TNR) that my partner Nick and I were doing for the feral cats in our area.

I told him what happened to those of us in exile, explained what we were going through. He talked about the case a little bit with me, and even sent over a file containing a confidential legal filing that wasn't supposed to be released regarding the case between him and Jon over the site. He asked me to delete it, but I kept it. I can't explain why, but I had it. Probably because I'm the biggest digital packrat I know.

But now deleted it. What's the point?

He promised all kinds of things to me in email. Like if he won the case, he was going to turn the site into a non-profit. That he would fix the problems and all the bugs. He even promised to create a blogging site for those bloggers who didn't want to be on AFF anymore.

Never happened.

During this time, we, the exiled bloggers started rallying bloggers old and new, people who used to blog and those who still were who were willing to testify, in court, on Andrew's behalf, about the decline of the site under Jon's leadership.

Turns out, that's not what was needed.

Chapter 8

Jon's voice was heavy with the weight of what he was about to explain.

"And just so you know, what happened is that there were issues with inappropriate content and behavior. I had employees coming to me raising concerns, and as CEO, I'm legally responsible for what happens in the company."

"Yeah. That makes a lot of sense."

The pieces were fitting together now – Jon hadn't fired Andrew out of malice or a business disagreement; he'd fired him because he was legally liable, because the situation couldn't continue.

"I get it more now," I said. "It's just, you gotta let my brain process, because I've had a lot to put in there this last week – trust me. Because going from being banned to being offered a job – mind blowing for me."

The cats were running around, but I was centered in on our conversation. There was something about being heard that appealed to me on deep level.

Jon's expression softened slightly. "Well, let me just tell you one of the reasons I was

encouraging this was not just because I think you could make a contribution, but also I thought if Andrew returns and I leave, you could maybe be a person he would listen to."

Wait – *what?*

If Andrew returns and Jon leaves? That was the endgame Jon was considering – step aside, let Andrew come back, and hope someone like me could keep Andrew grounded.

"Well, he may listen to me – he may. You know? When I was on there, when we were...you know, he always...he was really good to me anytime I offered suggestions or everything, and he knows who I am generally. This is a horrible situation. I can see...it's like no one – there's no solution that's gonna make everyone happy."

"No, I think it goes a lot deeper than just a simple – it's not that simple."

We sat with that for a moment. The impossibility of it all. The Florida heat pounding down on me, sweat beading from my brow.

"You'd have to experience it to understand," Jon said. "No. I mean, obviously, like, I'm trying to be very clear that I don't want you to think I let anger get the better of me in many ways. I have a temper, so I got angry with Andrew, and I could have handled it better."

I interrupted: "But I've also been given a lot of grace for my anger, and I can wholly hope that he would be able to give you grace for the anger you expressed and maybe approaching him as such, saying, 'I'm really sorry we let it get this far.'"

"I've tried. I've tried that."

I sat there trying to think as cats rubbed against my leg. "Already tried that. Yeah. I mean, there's a good chance his lawyer is also telling him not to talk to you."

"He didn't have to. He chose to come see me."

"Right." This was worse than I'd thought: Andrew had chosen to engage in the lawsuit, to keep the fight going, even when Jon had tried to make peace. I was flabbergasted.

"I wish I had a better – I don't really have a great answer for you," I said. "To be real honest with you, and I wish I did because I...the way I see it now is very different than the way I saw it when we talked last. I mean, I think if you only sort of experience one side of something, it's very difficult to see the entire picture."

He nodded. "Yeah. But I understand how Andrew feels when the company was sold and the new owners really wanted to come in and do stuff. And he repeatedly said, 'You know, I'll leave.' You know? 'If you want me to go, I'll go.' You run into a big problem, if you need help on a consulting level, but you just...you don't have to have me there."

"So it's really bad." Really bad felt like an understatement. I knew I wasn't prepared for any of this – how could I be? I didn't even graduate from college.

I continued: "But maybe our friend...because like I said, she talks about Andrew with fondness, and she talks about you with fondness to me. So I know that she's still friends with

him because I remember her saying at some point in the last couple months, she was seeing him, because he was coming down to California or something. So I know she's still talking to him. So I think she would be the better candidate."

I was talking about M, the person who encouraged this meeting between Jon and I. The one who was friends with both of them.

"But you seem to have a lot of insight into the case, and it's not really a legal issue," Jon said.

"It's not a legal issue, no. This is really more about trying to mend a rift that maybe can't be mended all the way, but maybe could be mended partially. Or at least – "

"Or at least stop all the nonsense." He finished my sentence.

"Yes. All the court nonsense, yes. Because that's gotta be costing a fortune. Costing you guys money in court cases. The money you have to be spending on a lawyer is gonna be insane nowadays. But do you have an ungodly amount of money? I mean, I don't know your situation."

Jon smiled slightly. "I certainly don't need the job. I could just stop working."

"Okay. Well, I mean, that's fair."

Of course. He had "ungodly" amounts of money. He was a CEO. He didn't need this headache, this lawsuit, this mess. He could walk away anytime.

But he hadn't. Not yet.

"I'm very aware of how much he sold it for," I said. "I did research into the company. I'm very aware. Whatever you have to pay, you have enough to retire now. I'm sure with all kinds of investment stuff. I, you know, I'm a simple woman who did not finish college."

"Really?" he interrupted.

"I didn't. I got married at 18 to a military man and left college."

"I wouldn't have thought you'd be...you know." he seemed genuinely confused.

"I left college to get married at 18 because I thought I was in love. But I wasn't in love. But when you're 18, you think a lot of things, and I did not wanna be away from him. So I just didn't go back because of money and mental health issues. You know, once you get older, it just becomes harder to try to go back to school and have a full-time job, you know? As time went on, I had stepchildren and stuff like that. And, yeah, it just...time got ate up, so I never went back."

Jon looked at me with what seemed like genuine respect. "Well, I'll try talking to our friend and see what I can do. And, I do think she may have better ideas than me, generally."

I thought about our mutual friend, M. How she'd been playing diplomat for months, talking to both men, trying to keep peace. "I was very concerned about telling the others that I was going back. One of them, Author – I was very nervous about telling her, because she has a

temper, quite a temper. But she did handle it very well. And what I was trying to say is I approached our friend, M, about it first, to try to get her advice because I felt like she would have a better way than me of telling her. I just didn't want her to get real pissed off – you know, get real angry – because I did it, and she's not coming back. Though she doesn't want to."

"Maybe she'll come back eventually." He was speaking of Author. Ms Japan and my UK professor friend had already returned. Author and I were holding out, refusing to return until M started intervening on Jon's behalf with me.

"And I've said that. I said maybe if Author finds out I'm doing well...she does know I was offered the job. That's all she knows for sure."

"I think she'll give herself permission to consider it."

"Obviously, I've learned to keep an open mind as I age, when my temper is low. Sometimes I can be a little bit stubborn."

Jon smiled genuinely for the first time in the conversation. "Well, sometimes people with big tempers also have big hearts."

"Yeah. Well, yeah, I do have quite a love of animals and people in general. I mean, I've just – the people of AFF have just really embraced me in a way that's so heartwarming. I can't...you know, it's just...no other way to explain it. The community over there is so special." I said, petting the cat on my lap.

"I know that for many people such as yourself, it's extremely important. And / think it's extremely important."

"Okay. Well, I'll talk to our friend, and we'll see what happens. That's all."

"Okay. Alright. Thank you, Debbi."

"If I think of anything, I will email you, write you a little quick letter if anything comes to mind. Okay?"

"Yeah. Alright. Thank you, ma'am."

"You're welcome. Bye bye."

The screen went dark.

I sat there, my mind racing. This wasn't just a job anymore. This was a CEO asking me to help mediate a friendship that had exploded into a lawsuit. This was about legal liability and lawyers and hurt feelings and a founder who couldn't let go of the site that defined him.

This was so much bigger than moderating blog posts.

Jon thought if Andrew came back and he left, I could be the person Andrew would listen to. He was planning his own exit, hoping I could be the bridge to keep things stable.

I'd gone from exiled troublemaker to potential peacemaker in a corporate divorce playing out

in California courts.

What the hell had I agreed to? I was in way over my head. Or, at least, I thought I was.

March 2024. Banned, exiled, cut off from the community I'd helped build, I sat in my garden, surrounded by thriving plants, and made a decision.

If they were going to silence my voice, I'd reclaim my body.

I'd been thinking about Wegovy for months. My insurance company had announced they'd cover it for people with both heart disease and obesity, both of which I had. My doctor had been recommending it since the announcement.

I'd resisted. Not because I didn't want to lose weight. My back pain was getting worse, limiting my mobility. The extra weight put pressure on my already weakened heart, my damaged knees, my surgically repaired foot. I feared I'd eventually lose the ability to walk altogether.

But I had a complicated relationship with dieting. I was wrapped up in feelings about my mother, about diet culture, about food as comfort and escape. Baking had been one of my greatest joys since I was 13. The thought of losing that – losing food as a source of pleasure – felt like losing another piece of myself.

Still, I'd nearly died four years ago. I'd just been banned from a community I loved. I was tired

of running from hard things.

"I think I need to do this," I told Nick.

He looked at me carefully. "You sure?"

"No. But I'm going to do it anyway."

April 9, 2024. I gave myself the first injection in my thigh.

The effect was almost immediate. Within hours, my appetite vanished. Not reduced – gone. I had to force myself to eat, setting phone alarms to remind me. A quarter of an apple left me feeling like I'd eaten Thanksgiving dinner.

The cravings disappeared too. All of them. Ice cream and cookies sat in my house, untouched. I just didn't want them.

I started documenting the journey on my independent blog. "Wegovy Wednesday," I called it. Week by week, tracking not just weight loss but the whole transformation.

I changed everything. Not gradually, but all at once. Dove in headfirst, the way I always did.

My first weigh-in was May 9th. Seventeen pounds lost in one month.

My doctor was thrilled. "If you're feeling good on the lowest dose, there's no reason to increase it."

I started strength training at the gym – low weights and high reps, four days a week. My back limited what I could do, but I did what I could.

For the first time in over a year, I could sit cross-legged in a chair again.

By August, I'd lost 37 pounds. But something changed: the cravings came back. Not the appetite, thank god, but the thoughts about chocolate, pizza, burgers. The food noise returned.

I stayed on the lowest dose for as long as I could, but eventually asked to increase to 0.5 mg when the cravings became too distracting.

September brought the fourth anniversary of my heart attack. Four years since I'd nearly died on Nick's birthday, since my femoral artery had burst and I'd come face to face with mortality.

I wrote about it on my blog, reflecting on how much I'd grown up in those two weeks in the hospital. How I'd stopped seeing myself as childlike, started taking responsibility for my health, my life, my healing.

The weight loss was part of that growth. Part of choosing life over self-destruction. Part of taking responsibility for my health instead of running from it.

September also brought radio frequency ablation on my lower back, burning the nerves that were causing so much pain. I took time off work, hoping for relief.

It didn't work – the pain continued. I worked with my doctor to figure out what was wrong, but in the meantime, I couldn't work out as much. I had to cut back to twice a week at the gym, and the setback affected my mental health – I turned to food for comfort again.

But I caught myself. Clamped back down. Kept going.

My doctor asked if I had a goal.

"I don't have an exact number," I said. "But I know it's probably on the low end of the overweight range. I've been in my 'ideal range' before, and I didn't like how I looked. I'm in it for my health most of all, but I prefer to be on the heavier side when it comes to appearance."

And then, in July 2025 – 16 months after I'd started – I reached my goal.

Ninety-three pounds lost. An entire person.

I asked my doctor to begin the step-down process, as I'd surpassed all goals any doctor had given me. I was at a healthy BMI. My taste buds had also changed – most sweets were too sweet now. I preferred grapes to candy. Ice cream in moderation, once or twice a week.

I weighed less than I had since I was 13 years old.

I'd nearly died in 2020 and spent the next five years learning how to really live. The weight loss was just one piece of that, taking control of my body the same way I'd taken control of my voice.

Reclaiming myself, one transformation at a time. Still refusing to be silenced.

Chapter 9

I opened Debbi Uncensored and started writing. Nick brought me a Diet Coke, set it on my desk without a word, just squeezed my shoulder and left me to my anger and grief.

This time, I'd stood my ground. I'd called out corruption and incompetence and cowardice. I'd refused to be silenced, even when silence would have been safer.

And yeah, it cost me.

I didn't sleep much. I'd lie awake at night, refreshing my email, waiting for the explanation that never came. Waiting for someone – anyone – from the company to acknowledge what they'd done.

"You need to move forward," Nick said one evening, finding me at my computer refreshing my email for the hundredth time. "Sitting there waiting for them to apologize...that's not healthy."

"I'm not waiting for an apology. I'm waiting for basic human decency."

"Same thing, in this case."

He was right. They weren't going to give me either.

The four of us who had been exiled had come together on a different platform, the one that hosted Debbi: Uncensored. We continued blogging there, having group conversations through email when we had time. But the platform was outdated, limited reach, clunky.

I wanted more. I wanted my voice to be louder, not silenced. So I did what I do when the world feels chaotic: I wrote.

I opened my own independent blog on a different platform. One with actual reach. Bought a domain name called ladycatlady.com. It's where I still blog to this day. I started documenting everything – the lawsuit, the censorship, the four of us getting banned without explanation, the gaslighting from customer service.

As I did this, I noticed something that made my blood boil.

They'd added a new feature to the community: a tip jar. Gold members could now activate a way for other users to tip them points for their posts, points that functioned as currency. Points that could be converted to membership time or other benefits.

And they were allowing this on posts that used images pulled from the internet, images the posters didn't own.

I sat at my computer, staring at the release notes, my hands shaking with rage. But I wasn't spiraling. I wasn't using sex or relationships or substances to escape, wasn't falling apart. I was focused, channeling my rage into something productive. Using my voice – the one they'd tried to silence – to speak truth.

Then a friend contacted me about a dating site publication – OnlinePersonalsWatch.com. It was mainly for CEOs of dating websites. Trade publication stuff.

"You should pitch them the lawsuit story," he said.

I looked at the publication. Industry insiders. People who knew Jon, who knew Andrew, who understood the implications of what was happening.

I contacted them. They asked me to write an article.

I wrote it. Documented everything: the 2021 debt acquisition, the purchase agreement, the call option agreement, Andrew trying to exercise his right to buy back the company, Jon refusing, the lawsuit, the motion to dismiss being denied.

<https://onlinepersonalswatch.com/2024/03/the-battle-for-friend-finder-networks-founder-andrew-conru-sues-ceo-jonathan-buckheit/>

"A legal battle is unfolding between Andrew Conru, the founder of Friend Finder Networks (FFN), and his long-time friend and subsequent CEO of FFN, Jonathan Buckheit, over the ownership of the company..."

I signed it: "by Debbi R – A long-time FFN User"

They published it in March 2024.

Now it wasn't just my independent blog documenting what was happening – it was an industry

publication, too. People in power would see it. Investors. Board members. People who could actually *do* something.

I'd gone from banned troublemaker to journalist covering a corporate war. *Oh, let me live my fantasy, it makes me happy.*

And I imagined Jon, somewhere in his office in California, reading that article and realizing I wasn't going to disappear quietly.

I wasn't just documenting the dysfunction; I was building a case. Gathering evidence. Positioning myself as someone who understood the company from the inside, who could articulate what was wrong, who had credibility both with the community and now with at least one industry publication.

I didn't know it then, but that article – that decision to go public in a trade publication – changed *everything*.

By mid-March, I'd documented dozens of policy changes, linked to multiple lawsuits they'd lost, and built a case that the company was more concerned with profit than members, more interested in silencing critics than fixing problems.

I had evidence. I had documentation. I had a platform – smaller than before, but mine.

What I didn't have was closure. An explanation. Basic respect.

And that's what finally pushed me over the edge.

On April 19, 2024, I sat at my computer with two printed letters in front of me. One addressed to Ali, and one addressed to Jon. I'd spent hours crafting them.

The letter to Jon's office in California started:

"Dear Dr. Buckheit,

Below please find the email I sent to Ali, your head of customer service. Considering you are his boss, I feel you should know my complaints about his abilities in 'customer assistance.'
Don't worry; I'm not mean or abusive, since I know that is something you're concerned with.
However, I am direct, since I have unaltered digital evidence for most of my claims."

I've included screenshots and links to my blog posts where everything was documented. Evidence they couldn't dismiss or deny.

The letter to Ali was longer, more detailed. Every grievance laid out with precision:

"It is highly entertaining that a customer service manager of an adult dating site isn't adult enough to reach out to the person he banned to tell them they were banned. It's even more comical given I was told by your customer service agent to wait to hear from you. Glad I didn't hold my breath because I never got that email!"

I quoted their TOU back at them, showing where they'd violated their own policies by not notifying me of my termination.

I documented the live chat conversation where the agent had gaslit me, telling me the blogs were down for everyone when my friends were literally looking at them at that moment.

"The rot starts from the top."

I called out the irony of being offered a chance to return if I opened a new profile: *"So, I'm bad enough that I can't be reinstated, but not bad enough that I can't be on the site? Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?"*

I didn't hold back: *"This is about a man on a power trip wanting to silence women by taking away their followings because they hurt his feelings or whatever. Who even knows? It's not like I was given the courtesy of being told why I was banned."*

I pointed out that one of the reinstated members had been warned before being banned. I hadn't received even that basic courtesy.

"Why would you? I wrote a blog that was only about gardening, cats, and my back problems for months. But, yeah, I crossed a line that nobody knew existed because it still doesn't exist in the TOU today. Mmmhmm. Yep. Makes perfect sense."

Then I went for the throat: *"It's ludicrous you think I would be willing to return to a site that is more concerned with criticism than child sex abuse material, otherwise known as 'child porn'"*

(I have proof, though unlike AFF, I will not be distributing it), scammers (got lots of proof of those too), censorship, inconsistent moderation, possible sex trafficking, and promotion of content theft."

Every word was true. Every claim documented. Every accusation backed by evidence I could produce if challenged.

I ended with this: *"I can tell you what I do know, I would never go back to a site with a gaslighting customer service manager who seems to be afraid to speak to customers.*

I hope censoring and punishing those who constructively criticize rather than fix the actual problems works out exactly as it should for you and the company. Given the voices in my inbox from members who stopped paying, it sure sounds like it is.

Sincerely,

Former Enigma Initiative

All hail the end of that fucking debacle!"

The next morning, I drove to the post office and asked for certified mail with return receipt. I watched the clerk weigh each envelope, apply the tracking labels, and enter them into the system.

Evidence. Documentation. Proof that I'd sent them, that someone would have to sign for

them, that they couldn't pretend ignorance.

I walked out of the post office feeling lighter than I had in weeks.

Not because I expected anything to change. Not because I thought they'd suddenly develop consciences or basic human decency. But because I'd said my piece. Told my truth. Refused to let them disappear me without consequence.

Chapter 10

I started working for AdultFriendFinder in June 2024. They hired me despite calling the CEO a loser, and being “too loud” and a thorn in their side.

My immediate supervisor was Alex. From day one, he treated me with a respect I hadn't expected. Not just professionally, but genuinely. Like my voice mattered, like my years of experience as a member gave me insight they needed.

I created games for the community. Silly things: trivia contests, photo challenges, anything to get people engaged and laughing. The members loved it. I loved it. For the first time in years, I felt like I was making a real difference.

Not in some grand, world-changing way, but in small, human ways that mattered. The work was meaningful in ways I hadn't anticipated.

But it was also complicated.

I gave a damn. More than I'd expected to.

I had a seat at the table now – a voice. The ability to advocate from the inside, instead of just criticizing from the outside.

Some days that felt like enough. Other days, it felt like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic – making small improvements while the whole ship slowly sank.

I'd fought so hard to be heard, to be seen, to matter. And now I was. That's the complicated truth I learned: you can work for a flawed company and still do meaningful work; be part of a broken system and still make a difference; and compromise your outsider status while still maintaining your integrity.

As long as you keep showing up, keep caring. Keep fighting for small improvements even when big changes feel impossible.

I showed up. I cared. I fought. And for a while, that was enough.

"I need to write this down," I said to Nick in October of 2024, as I made my costume for Halloween – the Red Queen from *Through the Looking Glass*.

"The memoir?" asked Nick.

"Yeah. All of it. The whole thing."

"You sure you're ready?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm ready."

Two weeks later, I started writing. Not blog posts. A memoir.

This memoir.

Chapter 11

Right before that conversation with Nick, in October of 2024, an article about Andrew came out in *The Guardian*. It included evidence pointing to the fact that Andrew Conru, through his philanthropic endeavors, gave money to race science. Eugenics. There was a huge amount of backlash on the site, from members of all kinds. Members who were silenced. Members who still can't talk about it on the site today from what I've been told by other bloggers.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/16/revealed-international-race-science-network-secretly-funded-by-us-tech-boss>

The article begins:

“Revealed: International ‘race science’ network secretly funded by US tech boss

Group promoting ‘dangerous’ scientific racism ideology teamed up with rightwing extremist, recordings reveal

Race science’ group say they accessed sensitive UK health data

An international network of ‘race science’ activists seeking to influence public debate with discredited ideas on race and eugenics has been operating with secret funding from a multimillionaire U.S. tech entrepreneur...”

Please refer to the actual article to read the entire thing and support *The Guardian*, the writers of the piece, and the group “Hope Not Hate” for their undercover reporting by typing “Andrew Conru Guardian” into any search engine. It will be the first thing that pops up, if you decide you want to read it.

My private inbox was filled to the brim with angry members. They were angry because I chose to believe Andrew's excuse that he didn't know he was funding race science. That's what he told *The Guardian* when that article exposed his alleged racist endeavors.

I spent hours upon hours attempting to defend him to people I called my friends. My UK professor friend and I literally almost stopped talking with each other because of it.

Many members were angry and they had every right to be. He presented himself as something he seemingly wasn't. I was trying to be the bridge, not the bomb, as was in my job description. They felt betrayed. Frankly, so did I.

Andrew went silent on the site, never to be heard from again as of October 2025 when I write this.

He did write an apology letter to the art community that he became a part of in Seattle. It is posted to his website. The words ring hollow now as I read them. It was COVID, and he saw a trend of “silencing opposing views.” He was concerned with “free speech.” He didn't know that he was supporting divisive research, he didn't research properly.

Yada yada.

Bullshit-corporate-media-trained-double-speak is the way I see it today.

Chapter 12

In late May of 2025, after a long battle with cirrhosis, the person I considered my mother-in-law died on my birthday. It was heartbreaking, devastating, but also expected. She was extremely ill for five years, bedridden for the last week of her life. The end came quickly for her, thankfully. It was difficult – more difficult for Nick than me, of course – but we made it through, together.

In late June of 2025, I received word that my nephew died, my sister's youngest son. Suicide. Though I hadn't been close to him later in life, his passing hurts my soul. I struggled because my sister still would not speak to me after I had kicked her out of my house in 2019. I couldn't go to the funeral, so I grieved in my own way, at home.

Late August 2025, I received a phone call from my brother that my sister died. Suicide. She couldn't take losing her son. Hell, she could barely take losing our parents. Her son? No, that was too much for her.

It took some time, but eventually we were able to have her funeral. Unfortunately, weather had other plans for us on that trip to Arizona in September of 2025.

Here's the blog post I wrote upon returning home on September 28, 2025:

Buckle Up Buttercups

(Wait, I'm a 68 model with no seatbelts, so hold on to whatever you can...)

This trip was an adventure, fully equipped with all the highs and lows you have all come to expect from me. It all started so wonderfully.

I'll spare you the minutiae of the finer details here – just know my friend and I got our rental car and hotel rooms without a problem. I called my niece, let her know I was in, and we made plans to meet for lunch Friday. It was a three-hour time difference for both of us, and I was asleep by 8:00 P.M. local time. LOL.

We met my niece at the restaurant. She and I spoke, at length, about everything that has been happening in our lives recently. Then, we all headed to her house to meet her husband and daughter. It seems my niece is taking care of her ex-stepsister's children, so, we met them too. And her husband's entire family was there.

So many people y'all. So many people I didn't know at all.

Good people, though. I'm so proud of the woman my niece has become and the life she's made for herself. Her husband and his family have embraced her and her ex-stepsister's children as part of their family. And welcomed me just the same, hugs and all.

We talked, took pics, and played with the kids until it was time for our movie – my friend and I made plans earlier to go see Fantastic Four. We made our plans to meet at the church in

Globe, Arizona on Saturday morning to help get everything set up and then we said our goodbyes.

The movie was enjoyable. When it was over, I realized that the weather was a lot cooler than I had packed for, so my friend and I went on a pantyhose hunt so I wouldn't be so cold. I packed mostly dresses. It took several stores, but we finally found some. Then, went back to the hotel for another early night bedtime for the ol' Debster.

On Saturday morning, everything changed in an instant.

I received a panic phone call from the florist, saying the entire town of Globe was condemned.

Oh yes, people. Weather hit Globe Friday night, and HARD.

TLDR: In an "unprecedented" amount of rain, the entire town of Globe was pretty well submerged. Cars were thrown into buildings by rushing water, five inches of hail fell, people died, and 10,000-gallon tanks of propane had rolled or washed from up the mountain and settled into downtown Globe.

So, yeah, that's where the funeral was supposed to be.

I called my niece. She called my sister's boyfriend because it was his father's church where the service was supposed to be held. We decided to move the entire service to the park in the next town over. We got into our car, drove up the mountain to Miami, Arizona and found

the park. Then we headed to Walmart to grab a bunch of stuff for the potluck, and I called the florist to tell her we moved it to the park.

When we returned to the park, my niece, her husband and his family were there. We were standing around waiting for the other people to arrive when the police came to tell us they were closing the street where the park was due to all the rainfall. The roads were pretty bad, to be fair – covered in dirt and sand. Most of the sideroads were unpassable.

They told us about a different park, so we thought we would try there. When we saw it, we knew it wouldn't work. Meanwhile, we had all been discussing reaching out to other churches. There was a Catholic Church right down the street from the park, in a part of the street that was not going to be blocked off while they cleaned up.

There was a funeral already happening in that church. So, when that funeral ended, my nephew-in-law's mother and I walked our happy asses up there. I spoke with the priest and deacon. They were aware of the situation in Globe and I told them my sister was baptized and had her first Communion in the Catholic Church. I also did some downright begging.

They were gracious enough to agree. We just had to wait for all the people who were stuck in Globe to show up. See, there is only one real way out of Globe, Highway 60, and that was blocked by a car wrapped around a tree. No one in Globe could get to Miami, which is about 10 miles away.

Once traffic started moving, people started arriving. I met all the people my sister spent the last six years of her life with, and then some. We got the services going, and the only hitch

happened when it turned out the VERY un-Christian-like preacher father of my sister's boyfriend refused to come to the services and give the eulogy he had planned.

The church where the services were supposed to be called the florist and told them we canceled the service, though they knew full well we just moved it. The florist called me. Boy did she step up to the plate. Anna's Petals in Globe – I can't recommend these people enough, seriously. They were awesome!

This church even allowed us to use their hall afterwards for the potluck. That's how you Christian, if you're going to do it – not like Mr. Petty above. I can't believe the amount of grace and kindness they showed all of us during this incredibly difficult time. It was truly touching.

I did a reading and gave one of the eulogies. Totally off the cuff, I was unprepared, but I did it.

I spent some time getting to know my sister's boyfriend and his family. A lot of healing happened for me in those conversations. They're private, so I won't share, but just know I felt better after talking with them. My niece's grandmother and aunt from her father's side also came, and it was good to see them both after all these years.

People told me I looked like Barbie, and they also told me I looked like a mermaid. Hardly anyone who had known me previously to my losing weight could even believe it was me – including my friend who had seen pics. This was the first time they were seeing, in person, post-weight loss.

That said, my sister's boyfriend and family never stopped commenting on how much I looked

like my sister. And, given the pics, I see it. When I was chubby, our faces couldn't have looked more different. But now? Oh yeah, you can tell we were siblings.

Rain was moving into Miami, so we got out of there because none of us wanted to be stuck on the mountain.

I am convinced my sister made this all happen so her final farewell could be even more dramatic. (Kidding.)

P.S. – I didn't need the pantyhose. It was hot.

After the services were over, we planned to take my niece and husband out to dinner at a Brazilian BBQ place. So, they went home, we went to the hotel, we all changed clothes, and my friend and I headed to her house.

We spent time with the kids and his family again, then went out to dinner, where they bullied me into trying food I didn't want to try. All three of them – they ganged up on me. Can you believe it?

By the way, I will NEVER be bullied into trying chicken hearts or lamb again. I tried them, and they're gross. It ain't happening again.

When dinner was over, we said our final goodbyes and went back to the hotel.

In the morning, we got to the airport on time. My first leg of the trip went really well.

THEN

I boarded the plane in Miami, Florida to get to Orlando. We started going down the runway....and boom. Something happened to the engine. By the time we got off the plane, it was 12:30 A.M.

I met and talked with many wonderfully kind people, stuck in the same position as me. The airlines gave us all a comped room, and I got checked in by 1:30 A.M. I was still wired for sound and struggled to fall asleep.

That 7:00 A.M. wake up call came too early, but off to the airport I went. Then you won't believe it, but my flight back in the morning was delayed due to mechanical issues.

SERIOUSLY?

I'm home, finally. But boy oh boy am I exhausted.

One of my IRL friends thinks I angered ancient gods or something.

Life brings challenges, but it also brings love. I felt so much love, kindness, and grace throughout this whole adventure from strangers and people I knew. That's the gift the storm gave me. Reminders of the beauty and grace of humanity.

So, how was your weekend?

Chapter 13

Two days after I returned home from Arizona for my sister's funeral, September 30, 2025, I was told by my immediate supervisor, Alex, that they were not going to renew my contract. I was upset. He was upset. We were both crying.

The new CEO, Brock Purpura, Andrew's friend, whom Andrew installed in July 2024 when he took over the company, had the head of the Human Resources Department write me a little AI-generated condolence letter as recompense. They even spelled my last name wrong, like the brilliant geniuses they are.

Here's that condolence letter:

Hi Alex, can you pass this message along to Deb Roberts from us?

Dear Debbi,

We were so sorry to hear of your loss, and our hearts go out to you during this difficult time.

We want you to know how much we appreciate your dedicated service to AFF. Your contributions have meant so much to us, and we're deeply grateful for everything you've done.

Please take care of yourself, and know that our thoughts are with you.

With sincere condolences and gratitude,

Brock and (redacted)

My response to Alex when he gave me that email with my last name spelled wrong?

"Hi Alex,

While I love you and always will.

They can kiss my lily-white ass.

Thanks

Debbi

My response to them wasn't as kind. (Please note, I'm leaving out one part due to signing an NDA.)

Hello (redacted) and Brock,

I would like you to know I reached out, tried to help. I offered up my story of how I learned about polyamory in my 20 years on the site. How I've had several successful long- and short-term relationships on the site, including one that's still going strong today. I wrote it in Brock's blog post. Hell, I just met a new man on the site and started talking about him in my personal

blog.

I also reached out to your new ambassadors offering help, never heard back from them.

I got on cam and proved real women were still there looking, to overwhelming positive results, in my free time.

I donated time trying to keep the peace when the bloggers were angry at one decision or another. The whole Andrew philanthropy scandal was a nightmare for my personal life.

I did it out of my love for the site.

Please thank the artificial intelligence program you used to write that "condolence letter" that is sorry for my loss, though there were three close family losses in four months. I didn't realize AI had hearts, though – that one is new to me.

I also appreciate that it appreciated my dedicated service. How kind of it to notice – (some information here redacted for NDA.) – that has to be why its grateful for my contributions.

Als can have complex thought processes about human emotions? Is it possible to get a link to the literature on how programmers have made that happen?

It's wonderful how you spelled my last name wrong, too. Way to go out of your way to show the company's compassion and personal touch after I lost three family members in four months, only to get fired the day I returned from my baby sister's funeral where we had to change venues three times due to the torrential rain in Arizona condemning the town it was

supposed to be in. I feel so valued.

I'm so glad I championed Andrew's return, spent so much time trying to get members on his side, only to get fired.

You have destroyed whatever love I had for the site.

I'm heartbroken.

I am no longer blogging there. I know you don't care. And that's okay, you don't have to, I don't need you.

Don't worry about my NDA, I understand it perfectly. I saw a lawyer because I'm writing a book. He will be checking it for me to make sure I don't run afoul of it.

Enjoy!

-Debbi Robert

Attached please find several pieces of verification that your "heartfelt condolences" were written by a machine. I can assure you my book won't be.

Here is my goodbye letter to the Community at AdultFriendFinder. I can't bring myself to go back there to blog anymore:

Goodbye

The writing is on the wall, and I see it crystal clear now. While I've had my suspicions for quite some time, recent events have only confirmed what I already knew deep down.

Please allow this blog post to serve as my official goodbye. I won't be back this time, people.

I gave and gave. They took and took. In the end, I was terminated unceremoniously upon returning home from a harrowing trip to Arizona for my sister's funeral. Because apparently, nothing says "compassionate workplace" quite like firing someone fresh off a funeral.

I'll miss the camaraderie we shared, but it's not the same for me now. While I'll remain checking in on you all, my words? They belong to me now. I have no inclination to share them here, where they'll be capitalized upon by an organization that screwed me over and turned my life into a circus for a year straight – only to can me in the end.

So long, and thanks for the trauma.

Over 50 bloggers and commenters came to say goodbye. Here's one that touched me the most from a blogger in Greece:

"I am at a loss for words.

This should not have happened, especially to you, especially at this time in your life.

Proof enough that they don't follow the community, and don't bother with the spirit of the community.

I will miss your holistic approach, the sharing of the positive and the negative, the spirit of giving, the resilience, the cycle of nature, what makes life worth living.”

Thousands of members have viewed it now. I left it up, along with every other piece I wrote criticizing the site over the years, and took down everything else. With that, I never signed in again, with the exception of when I went to copy my goodbye letter and the comment for this memoir today.

Upon closing down most of my blog posts on AdultFriendFinder, I noticed a strange visitor in my blog. Someone who read three months' worth of blog posts I wrote. Given I've worked there, I knew what I was seeing. It was an administrative profile. I suspect it was Andrew.

I wrote an email to him:

October 9, 2025

Hello Andrew,

Maybe I'm speaking into the ether. If I am, that's okay, because I need to get a few things off of my chest and don't feel as though I have an appropriate place to do it.

I have a suspicion you've been in a few of my blogs lately. I could be wrong, maybe I am.

M told Jon of you not renewing my contact. I've now spoken to Jon, who wrote me a wonderful apology email telling me that I wasn't supposed to work in Site Support, like a

human being and everything. He explained why he hired me in that meeting. That doesn't matter, now, though, does it?

You know, Andrew, I was always here. I was always championing you. When that story came out, I told all the other bloggers that you didn't know that's what they were doing. That you were actually concerned about free speech. (Some information redacted for NDA.)

You could have emailed. I'm a reasonable woman – I would have listened to you with open ears.

When you hired that cam couple, you could have come to me to ask me to help get the community on their side.

Instead, you are silent.

That says a lot to me.

You sold us a bill of goods, then didn't deliver...again.

You promised me all kinds of things about what you wanted for the site, in emails I still possess.

It's all just so sad.

I can't compromise my integrity by continuing to blog there, no matter how much I love the Community we helped build.

I am, however, throwing a party for the bloggers, at my expense.

You see, Andrew, had you all looked at my invoices, you weren't paying me much. And I didn't log all the hours I worked. I donated my time because I truly care. It was never about the money for me; it was about improving the site experience for the members.

Please feel free to read the last chapter and epilogue of the memoir I wrote on my website ladycatlady.com. The epilogue is the only time I talk about my time working on the site. My memoir of my time as a user to cam girl to hired is a fascinating one...compelling, as my editor says. It's very candid and open, as I usually am.

Take Care of Yourself.

I wish you no ill will.

But I also wish you had reached out because I think this all could have been very different.

So long...

Debbi

The editing process changed the "last chapter and epilogue" to Chapters 9 and 10 in this memoir, and that blog post remains public today.

With that, I let it all go. The site, the anger, all of it. What was the point? I made a difference. It wasn't huge, but it was real.

I don't want the site capitalizing on my friendships anymore.

Chapter 14 – Epilogue

After fifty years of being a disorganized mess who struggled to focus and the very epitome of “Look, squirrel!” that could barely sit still, I was diagnosed with ADHD. It’s helped me view my life through a different lens than the one I had when I began writing this memoir. Any discordance in writing style is due to that, I can assure you.

I’ve received emails from many of the members, bloggers and readers alike; many wrote tributes to me after I left, and some even came over to follow me on my ladycatlady.com website where I still provide free content about my life today. Many of them only come so they can keep up with the gardening – so many have come to love the color I provide during the cold winter months in the north.

Why not for the other stuff? Because I tell all of them about everything else in email, phone calls, Google meets, and texts. You don’t think I stopped talking to them, do you? They’re my friends. I love them.

I wrote an email to Jon through our mutual friend, M, who helped facilitate the meeting, thanking him for the opportunity

Hi Jon,

I know M told you. I just wanted to reach out and thank you for the opportunity you gave me. I can't put into words the amount of gratitude I have for whatever you saw in me in that meeting when you offered me the job.

They stuck me in moderation, and I never got a chance to "help with Andrew," as you had hoped. I did manage to bring some heart to the job, but they decided to be heartless when not renewing my contract after a harrowing trip to Arizona for my baby sister's funeral, where we had to change venues three times due to the torrential rains and floods that washed away the town where my sister lived and the funeral was supposed to happen. They literally fired me the day I returned from that.

I was heartbroken. You know how much I loved the site.

I have written a memoir now – it's with the editor.

I won't be back on AdultFriendFinder blogging; it's too painful now.

Regardless of the ending, the beginning? You made that happen and I wanted to thank you again. I truly appreciate it from the bottom of my cold, dark heart. ;)

All the best,

Debbi

Jon responded:

Hi Debbi,

M was kind enough to forward your message to me.

I am so sorry to hear about your sister and the circumstances of your departure from AdultFriendFinder.

I don't know why you were just put in moderation, but that was definitely not why I hired you.

What I saw in you was a lot of passion, a lot of energy, a lot of heart, a lot of brains, and a real opportunity for the company if it was all channeled in a positive way that aimed to improve things.

Those qualities you have are not limited to AdultFriendFinder blogging, and this is the thought I'd like to leave you with.

Regards,

Jon

I responded:

Hi Jon,

Thank you for returning my email; it was very kind of you. I have learned, through experience, that I backed the wrong "pony" in the lawsuit. Hindsight is 20/20 after all. I appreciate all your

compliments, you're too sweet and are going to give me diabetes, for goodness' sake. By the way, did M tell you I lost 100 pounds while working there? Yes, life is different today than when we first spoke, for sure.

I did site support work, moderation, and created community games and ran them successfully. I helped tame the tension when the race science philanthropy scandal came out; and helped manage bloggers behind the scenes when decisions were made they didn't like. I also brought them the idea of working with an organization that helps battle revenge porn.

Finally, I genuinely loved working with Alex and the guys at site support. I formed such wonderful relationships with them that have enriched my life ever so much.

All my best,

Debbi

I included Chapter 10 of this memoir in my response to him.

Debbi,

I'm looking forward to the whole thing! Yes, Alex (redacted) is great. I hope he's not let go.

Regards,

Jon

I grew to love the team I had worked with and I try to stay in touch when I can. I know they are all doing their best under what I feel are the most difficult of circumstances.

There were many touching goodbyes:

"I'm so sorry to hear that" said one coworker

"???huh?" was another response.

"I'm so sorry and truly sad to hear this, Debbi. It was such a pleasure working with you.

You've done so much for the team and the site, and it never went unnoticed. Thank you for everything."

"So sorry to hear, Deb. We're going to miss you here"

"Who will I talk to now that you're gone?"

Alex commended me on my hard work and dedication. What I did for the company and members went beyond what anyone knows, what I can tell anyone. But, they know, the guys in Community Support. They know.

"I think I speak for the team on behalf of everyone when I say your presence and humor will truly be missed, Debbi. You brought much needed energy and positivity to the team, and it was an honor to work along side you."

And, guys, if you read this, you know how much I love you. No more needs to be said.

Back in 2019, when I kicked my sister out of the house in a fit of PTSD rage, I also quit social media altogether, cutting ties with all my family.

I've begun mending those fences and rebuilding the bridges that I abandoned long ago, including reaching out to my daughter. I haven't heard back from her, but we will see.

I have wonderful relationships with my sister's two remaining children, and have begun bonding with their children, my grandnieces and grandnephew. Suicide is obviously an issue in my family; I need to keep up with them all.

My maternal aunts and uncles welcomed me back into the fold with open arms, and they read my blog to this day. They have also planned the first family reunion in over 20 years, next summer. I get chills just thinking about seeing everyone!

Life, she sure has changed, and me along with it. I've maintained a 100-pound weight loss without the benefit of Wegovy since July 2025, when my insurance decided they would no longer cover it. I do it through hard work and dedication to my overall wellbeing.

I have three men in my life who respect me and treat me with a great amount of care.

My nesting partner, Nick, and I continue to run a trap, neuter, and release program for the

feral cats in our area.

We are planning a blogger bash at our home for our friends on AdultFriendFinder in February of 2027. The ones who can attend, at least – we will set up a webcam link for everyone else to join virtually. People are excited to get away from their cold climates and come to balmy Orlando, even if it's more than a year away.

I no longer feel discontented in any way. I have love, a home, community, family, and friends. What more could a woman need?

Sure, I have regrets, but those regrets led me here. A lot of good has come out of my life and I'm not done.

I'm in therapy, but now it's more I call her when something big comes up and I want to talk it out. She knows sometimes I feel like I need a professional because I still question myself, but we aren't on a regular schedule, anymore.

I also see a psychiatrist for ADHD. I can't be on the typical stimulants they give to patients due to my heart issues, but we're working with different treatments, trying to get the right one. She's talking about trying genetic testing, given my poor history with psychiatric medication in the past, but even if they can't find something that will work, I think we can all agree I'll be okay because...

I'm the Post-Traumatic Stress Queen!

For those who are wondering how I feel about adultfriendfinder.com today: Capitalism is gonna capitalize, and AFF is all about those dollar bills. If you're a customer, do you think it's worth being capitalized upon by them after everything?